

# **The Ambiguity of Qohelet**

A study of the ambiguous nature  
of the language, syntax and structure  
of the Masoretic text of Qohelet

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## ABSTRACT

The premise upon which this thesis is founded is that the book of Qohelet is fundamentally ambiguous. Ambiguity is attached to all its major themes, and can be discerned in its language, syntax and structure. This has not been given due attention in previous works on Qohelet.

The introduction considers the concepts of 'ambiguity' and 'meaning': it is crucial for the reader to understand what is meant in this thesis by these terms. 'Ambiguity' is understood as those aspects of the text whose indeterminacy requires the reader to fill in 'meaning' in order for a coherent reading to be produced: thus the reader's role is crucial, but is nonetheless restricted by the determinate schemata in the text.

Part 1 explores the determinate schemata in Qohelet in an attempt to provide objective criteria against which the ambiguities may be set. Detailed attention is paid to the text in order to discern trends and patterns in the book. These are employed in an attempt to discover how the book as a whole and the sections within it are structured. Part 1 ends by asserting that it is ultimately futile to seek an overall structure or pattern to the book: this is an aspect of its ambiguity.

Part 2 systematically examines linguistic and syntactical ambiguities in Qohelet, exploring the possibilities for interpretation according to the ways in which the reader fills in the gaps left by these ambiguities.

The conclusion argues that the ambiguity of Qohelet is the primary reason for the hugely diverse interpretations of the book throughout its history, and for the many varied proposals for its structure. In this way it is a realistic reflection of an ambiguous world and the relationship between the people of this world and the God who made the world with all its ambiguities.



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## CHAPTER 1, Introduction

The book of Qohelet is ambiguous. It is upon this premise that the following thesis is founded. However, the statement is itself problematic, perhaps even ambiguous (it is certainly open to more than one interpretation, as we shall demonstrate), and requires further explanation.

### 1.1 The ambiguity of 'ambiguity'

The explanation should perhaps start by considering what is indicated in our opening statement by the term 'ambiguous'. Ambiguity describes some indeterminacy<sup>1</sup> of meaning or significance in a word, phrase, sentence or longer piece of written or spoken language, or in any action which could be perceived as an act of communication. The indeterminacy may be because it is unclear what the author of a piece of language or an action intends to convey by it; or because the word/words or action/actions used allow(s) for more than one meaning in the context - whether or not this is intended by their author, and whether or not it is clear what (s)he intends to convey; or because the word/words or action/actions used appear(s) not to give any coherent meaning in the context. In an often-cited passage in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*<sup>2</sup>, William Empson extends the scope of ambiguity in a literary context so far as to include 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (1953:1)<sup>3</sup>. By this definition, taken to its extreme limits, all language (and, likewise, any action - but henceforth we shall restrict our discussion to ambiguity in language)

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<sup>1</sup>It may, of course, be said that this is a loaded term. However, as will become apparent, when the concept of ambiguity is taken to its logical conclusions 'gaps' or 'spaces' or 'aporia' are revealed in the text which suggest the kind of 'indeterminacy' of which, for example, Iser makes a great deal in his article 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response' reprinted from *Aspects of Narrative, Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. J Hillis Miller (New York, 1971), pp.2-45, in Newton (1988:226-231).

<sup>2</sup>Cited, for example, in Eagleton (1983:52); Gray (1984:15); Freund (1987:44).

<sup>3</sup>Page (1985:13) extends the sense of ambiguity even further when she writes,

*Ambiguity* as I shall use it enlarges 'double meaning' to polyvalence, that is, the way in which anything may be interpreted or evaluated in a variety of ways according to one's point of view, intention, practice or culture. Even a rock in the remotest jungle is ambiguous in this sense, since it may be analysed geologically, mined, climbed, depicted, act as a tribe's totem or a home for plants and animals, and will be seen differently in each case. [Her emphasis]



could be considered as ambiguous because it is always possible to extort different 'meanings' (or perhaps 'significances' - we shall consider the importance of these two terms below) from a word or collection of words according to the predilections of the reader or hearer<sup>4</sup>. It is for this reason that Empson has been accused of using the term 'ambiguity' in a confusingly loose manner so that it fails to convey anything sufficiently concrete to be of critical value<sup>5</sup>. But it is also for this reason that *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, despite being written from an 'intentionalist' perspective, has attracted the attention of literary critics who seek to free language from authorial intention and allow it to function as an autonomous entity; and has also been utilised by those for whom the reader is the final authority in determining, and perhaps even creating, the 'meaning' of a text. Thus Jonathan Culler (1975:125-7) regards structuralism as the logical extension of Empson's work,

William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is a work from a non-structuralist tradition which shows considerable awareness of the problems of literary competence and illustrates just how close one comes to a structuralist formulation if one begins to reflect on them (1975:125).

Terry Eagleton (1983:51-2), on the other hand, suggests that *Seven Types of Ambiguity* opens the door to a reader-oriented approach to literature,

Empsonian ambiguities ... can never be finally pinned down: they indicate points where the poem's language falters, trails off or gestures beyond itself, pregnantly suggestive of some potentially inexhaustible context of meaning. Whereas the reader is shut out by a locked structure of ambivalences, reduced to admiring passivity, 'ambiguity' solicits his or her active participation: an ambiguity as Empson defined it is 'any verbal nuance, however, slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language'. It is the reader's response which makes for ambiguity, and this response depends on more than the poem alone (1983:52)<sup>6</sup>.

## 1.2 The meaning of 'meaning'

We asserted above that ambiguity is some indeterminacy of *meaning*, but the word 'meaning' is itself highly ambiguous. The question of where the meaning of a piece of lan-

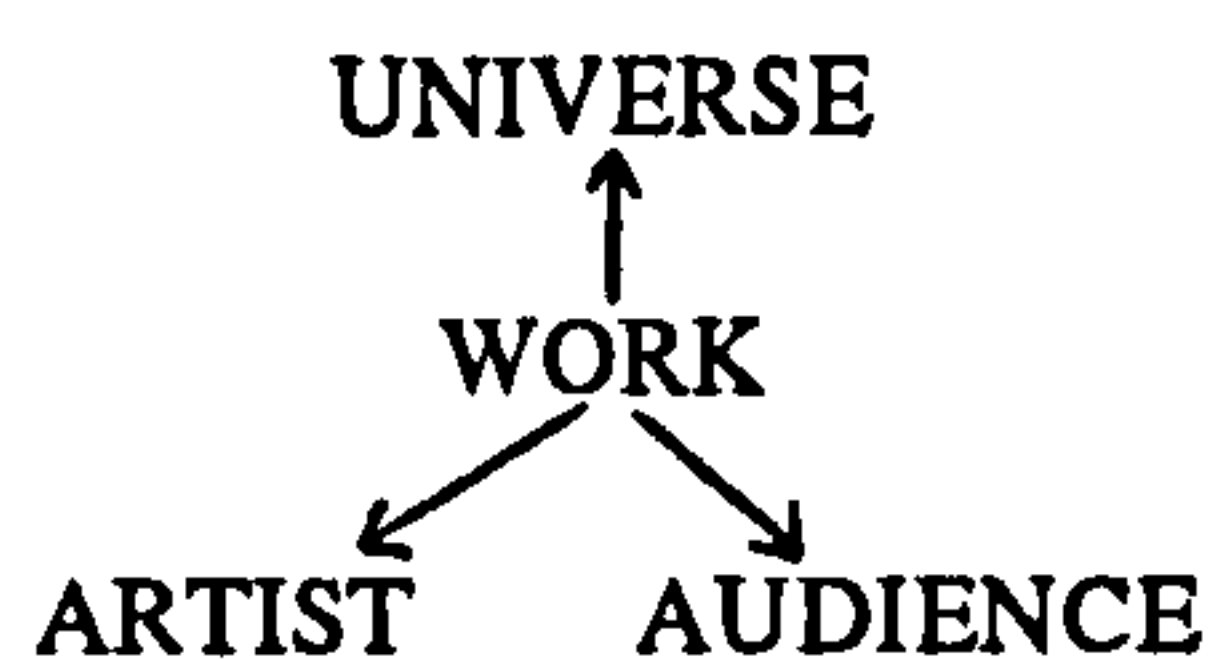
<sup>4</sup>Page (1985:35) acknowledges,

The endeavour to entertain Ambiguity (sic) is vertiginous, for one ambiguous instance has to be explained by something else which is itself ambiguous, unfinished, open to interpretation. So nothing can be finalized. Taken seriously, it leaves no firm rock on which to stand, no perduring order on which to rely.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Bateson (1950:180), and Rimmon-Kenan (1977:16-26). This is also an accusation levelled by James Smith in a review in *Criterion* for July 1931 - an article which Empson addresses in the preface to the second edition (and subsequent editions) of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

<sup>6</sup>This same issue is addressed by Freund (1987:42-49) who refers to '... indeterminacy of language - the rebellious phenomenon of semantic plurality of the kind which Empson explored' (1987:43).

guage is to be found has exercised the minds of literary critics ever since the emergence of New Criticism in the 1920s and 1930s<sup>7</sup>: is meaning to be found in the intention of the author or artist who created the piece of language; in the work itself; in the response of the audience; in the world or universe from which the work derives and/or from which the reader derives; or in some combination of two or more of these? A diagram drawn by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1958:6) has become the standard way of representing the four objects of critical investigation in a 'work of art':



### 1.2.1 Authorial meaning

If the artist or author is viewed as the source of meaning, a piece of language is regarded as the medium through which the author communicates to his or her audience. Meaning is, in Husserl's terms, an 'intentional object' and is permanently fixed by the author at the time of writing. The task of the critic is then to determine what the author intended at the time of writing, and if this is hindered by the ambiguity of the text, the author can be said to that extent to have failed in communicating her or his intention. In the case of the Bible this issue is further complicated by the notion of divine inspiration whereby the author may be in some fashion and to some greater or lesser degree regarded as conveying the intention of another Author, that is God<sup>8</sup>. If the authority of the author in determining the meaning of a

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1936, first published in 1923). Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, first published in 1924, had a major impact on the formation of what came to be known as 'New Criticism', along with works of T. S. Eliot such as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, first published in 1933. However, the label was fixed with the publication of J. C. Ransom's *The New Criticism* in 1941. It is noteworthy that commentators seem to be uncertain whether to include Empson, who was a pupil of Richards, among the ranks of New Critics. Freund (1987:42-49) compares Richards and Empson in a section of her book titled 'Regulating and deregulating meaning: Richards and Empson', while Eagleton (1983:53) argues that 'in the opposition between [Empson's] 'ambiguity' and New Critical 'ambivalence' we find a kind of early pre-run of the debate between structuralists and post-structuralists'.

<sup>8</sup>See particularly in this regard Kaiser 1981:108-14, where he explores the concept of the *sensus plenior* in biblical texts.



biblical text is denied, does this necessarily also deny the authority of the Author<sup>9</sup>? In this case 'authorial' intention and 'Authorial' intention may need to be considered separately, and it may be that the question of Authorial intention should still be regarded as something worth examining even if the author is no longer seen as dictating meaning. This is an important factor in consideration of biblical literature in general and Qohelet in particular, especially when the identity of its author is so vague. Of course, such considerations also raise the highly pertinent question of whether the Bible as a specifically religious work is not a special case which ought to be excluded from the general field of literary criticism (though as *literature* it would be a proper object of such study<sup>10</sup>).

A major proponent of an author-oriented approach to meaning in literature (who readily admits the influence of Husserl's philosophy of meaning<sup>11</sup>) is E. D. Hirsch, who rigorously defends 'the stable determinacy of meaning' (1976:1), where the meaning of a work is identical with what the author meant by it at the time of writing. While Hirsch contends that '[t]he reader should try to reconstruct authorial meaning' (1976:8), he also allows that a literary work may 'mean' different things to different readers at different times. However, this variable 'mean'-ing he labels (1976:80) not as 'meaning' but as 'significance',

while meaning is a principle of stability in an interpretation, significance is a principle of change. Meaning-for-an-interpreter can stay the same although the meaningfulness (significance) of that meaning can change with the changing contexts in which that meaning is applied.

This is an important distinction which is evidently valid to some extent. Eagleton (1983:67-70), for example, refers to a reading of Macbeth which makes it relevant to nuclear warfare:

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<sup>9</sup>Although for Barthes the term 'Author' is not directly applied to God, the results of his 'Death of the Author' (1977:146) undoubtedly have theological consequences:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing .... In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law.

<sup>10</sup>The 'General Introduction' in Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987), succinctly argues the case for studying the Bible as literature. They readily admit that their aims 'are not theological', and that they 'do not seek to duplicate the work of traditional historical scholarship' (1987:2). Rather there has been 'a revival of interest in the literary qualities of these texts' (1987:1) over the past couple of decades, such that

Professional biblical criticism has been profoundly affected by it; but, even more important, the general reader can now be offered a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority, a work of which it is entirely credible that it should have shaped the minds and lives of intelligent men and women for two millennia and more (1987:2).

'It is this view of the Bible,' they add, 'that the present volume seeks to promote.'

<sup>11</sup>See Hirsch, 1976:79n.2



while Macbeth may bear such a 'meaning' for a late twentieth century audience, this is not what Shakespeare would have 'meant' by it, and this distinction might be represented by asserting that the 'meaning' of Macbeth may have this particular 'significance' for a twentieth century audience. Thus the work takes on a significance which Shakespeare could not have intended<sup>12</sup>.

### 1.2.2 Textual meaning

For the New Critics the intentions of the author are of no importance: as Wimsatt and Beardsley (1970:5) argue in the best-known piece of New Critical writing, 'The Intentional Fallacy'<sup>13</sup>:

The poem<sup>14</sup> is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it).

According to New Criticism the text itself is the source of meaning regardless of what may have been intended by the author, and regardless of the response of the reader. The task of the literary critic is to be a scientific or objective one (as opposed to the subjectivism of author- or reader-oriented approaches) because meaning is embodied in the text and is 'wholly accessible to anyone with a knowledge of the language and culture to which the text belongs' (Jefferson and Robey, 1986:81). Thus Wimsatt and Beardsley (1970:87) write,

We enquire now not about origins, nor about effects, but about the work so far as it can be considered by itself as a body of meaning. Neither the qualities of the author's mind nor the effects of a poem upon a reader's mind should be confused with the moral quality of the meaning expressed by the poem itself.

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<sup>12</sup>Fox, whose recent commentary on Qohelet has an important bearing on this thesis, follows Hirsch's line of reasoning. In *Semeia* 19 (1981:53), *The Book of Job and Ricoeur's Hermeneutics*, he argues:

The primary task of exegesis is ascertaining the text's meaning, which is to be identified with the authorial intention ... My main concern in approaching a text is essentially the same as that of traditional literalist exegesis: to ascertain the meaning of the text, which is to say, the authorial intention. Following E. D. Hirsch, I would apply the term 'meaning' only to the authorial meaning. All the other understandings are better termed 'significances'.

See also the opening paragraph in Fox and Porter (1978:26) - the comment, '...otherwise there is no limit to the meanings one can read into the text and the author will have failed to communicate *his* meaning' [their emphasis], is telling.

Longman (1987:64-5) argues similarly:

If literature is an act of communication, then meaning resides in the intention of the author. The author has encoded a message for the readers. Interpretation then has as its goal the recovery of the author's purpose in writing ... Our interpretation is correct insofar as it conforms to the meaning intended by the author.

<sup>13</sup>This article, which first appeared in 1946, and 'The Affective Fallacy', which first appeared in 1949 (both in the *Sewanee Review*), provide a theoretical basis for the New Critical attack on the notion of expressive criticism.

<sup>14</sup>'Poem' is used, as Robey points out (in Jefferson and Robey, 1986:81), as 'short-hand ... for a literary work of art'.

There is evident validity in this argument too: there is no *a priori* reason why the author should be more qualified than any other critic (and she/he is in any case less likely to be an impartial critic) to assess the meaning embodied in a piece of language<sup>15</sup>. The meaning of language is a social matter, and no individual may ascribe an objective meaning to a piece of language unless it can be scientifically determined by any other competent individual within that society, regardless of whether or not he or she created that piece of language ('moulded' may be a better term - the point is precisely that it is not creation *ex nihilo*), and regardless of what his or her intentions may be.

A major philosophical difference between Hirsch and the New Critics is that Hirsch, following Husserl, views meaning as pre-linguistic: meaning is intended and then captured in language; while for the New Critics, more in line with Heidegger's philosophy, language pre-exists meaning and meaning cannot exist apart from language<sup>16</sup>. Thus for Hirsch the author conveys *his or her* meaning through the medium of language, and the critic's task is to unwrap that intentional meaning (and, it may be argued, once the meaning is found the text becomes obsolete, like the wrapping on a parcel); but for New Criticism language is the meaning (and so the text never becomes obsolete), and the critic's task is to discern the *public* meaning that is embodied in the piece of language itself. It should be noted, however, that from both perspectives there is a definitive meaning to be uncovered, a truth or reality which it is the critic's task to seek. In an author-oriented approach, the 'truth' to be sought is specifically the authorial intention: this is the 'reality' which the critic seeks to uncover, however poorly the author may have succeeded in conveying it. In the New Critical approach to the text the 'truth' to be sought is the meaning the words have for the society in which they function: the critic's task is

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<sup>15</sup>An excellent example of this is provided by Eco's debate (1992) with Culler, Rorty and Brooke-Rose about his own novels, especially *Foucault's Pendulum*.

<sup>16</sup>The concept of the *logos* comes to mind here, and, in theological terms, particularly the beginning of John's Gospel. Discussion of the philosophical and theological implications of this word is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, but the notion of 'logocentrism' forms an important aspect of consideration of deconstruction (and its rejection of logocentrism must have theological implications) which shall be mentioned briefly below. See, e.g., Culler (1982:99-111); Norris (1982:29-31); Jefferson (Jefferson and Robey, 1986:112-119).



to discover what is 'signified' by the 'signifiers'<sup>17</sup> of which language is composed, and this elucidates society's understanding of reality rather than the author's. Structuralists take this a step further by asserting that the 'signifiers' are totally arbitrary designations of 'signifieds'<sup>18</sup>, and the critic's task is then to uncover the *system* (or structure) of the language which uses these words, rather than attempting to determine meaning. We shall consider structuralism in a little more detail later.

In the case of both Hirsch's approach and that of New Criticism, ambiguity can be adjudged successful or otherwise precisely to the extent that it assists or inhibits comprehension of the meaning of a piece of language. From these perspectives 'ambivalence' is a much more comfortable concept, because it is clear that different and even opposing attitudes may be displayed by one piece of language. The difference between 'ambivalence' - whereby meanings can still be fixed, albeit that the meanings so fixed may be in opposition - and 'ambiguity' - whereby, we have suggested, there is some indeterminacy of meaning - is very important to our discussion. Consideration should be given to the extent to which these two terms apply to Qohelet.

### 1.2.3 Readerly meaning

The concept of ambiguity, as opposed to ambivalence, lends itself very readily to a reader-oriented approach to literature precisely because ambiguity describes indeterminacy of meaning which permits, even requires, the reader to determine meaning - one example of 'the gaps of indeterminacy' of which Wolfgang Iser writes<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, for a piece of language to be 'ambiguous' rather than just 'ambivalent' (although, due to the ambiguous nature of 'ambiguity', both cases are covered by the term 'ambiguous') there must be the possibility of different readings of that piece of language. It may be that such ambiguity has little effect on

<sup>17</sup>As is well known in literary circles, the 'signifier' is the word, or sound-image, and the 'signified' is the concept which that word names. Together the signifier and signified make up the linguistic sign which is used in a language to express the concept. Thus as Hawkes explains,

The structural relationship between the concept of a tree (i.e. the *signified*) and the sound-image made by the word 'tree' (i.e. the *signifier*) thus constitutes a linguistic sign, and a language is made up of these: it is 'a system of signs that express ideas' (1977:25).

<sup>18</sup>Onomatopoeia is an obvious exception to the *total* arbitrariness of signifiers - but even onomatopoeia is culturally determined and does not represent an absolute link between signifier and signified.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Iser's article entitled 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response' in Newton, 1988:226-231.

the *overall* understanding of a work, as in the case of a pun which is the simplest example of ambiguity. On the other hand, a complete work may be ambiguous and susceptible to more than one reading: this is the case in Qohelet.

Reader-oriented theories of literature are hugely varied, but have in common a focus on the reader as, to a greater or lesser extent, determinant of meaning. The range of reader-oriented approaches to literature falls roughly on a line from Hans Robert Jauss's Reception Theory, through Wolfgang Iser's theory of indeterminacy (Iser being counted among both the Reception Theorists and the Reader-Response Critics), to the Reader-Response Criticism of Stanley Fish.

### 1.2.3.1 Hans Robert Jauss

Jauss is concerned with how a piece of language is perceived by different audiences, from the original audience right up to the present time - for

[a] literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence (Newton, 1988:222).

It is clear from the title of his essay 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory' (Newton, 1988:221-6<sup>20</sup>), as well as the seven theses he proposes in that essay, that Jauss's purpose is to place historical concerns at the centre of literary studies. There are three different aspects to such a literary history. Firstly, no reading occurs in an 'informational vacuum' but rather is always set against the background of the 'horizon of expectations'<sup>21</sup> of any particular reader, and this horizon is the result of the reader's literary experience (theses 1 and 2). Thus, whenever a literary work is read:

<sup>20</sup>First presented as his inaugural address at the University of Constance in 1967 under the title, 'What is and for what purpose does one study literary history?', this now famous (or 'notorious' according to Holub, 1984:53) address is the basis upon which most commentaries of Jauss's reception theory are based (e.g., McKnight, 1985:75-78; Jefferson and Robey, 1986:132-135; Hawthorn, 1987:119-121; Newton, 1988:219-226). However, Holub (1984:53-82) maintains that Jauss moved his position considerably from the theses set out in this article.

<sup>21</sup>The concept of 'horizon of expectations', drawn from Gadamer, is the acknowledged 'methodological centrepiece' of Jauss's theory upon which it largely stands or falls. However, Holub (1984:59) argues that

The trouble with Jauss's use of the term 'horizon' is that it is so vaguely defined that it could include or exclude any previous sense of the word. In fact, nowhere does he delineate precisely what he means by it.



[it] awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the 'middle and end', which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text (1988:223).

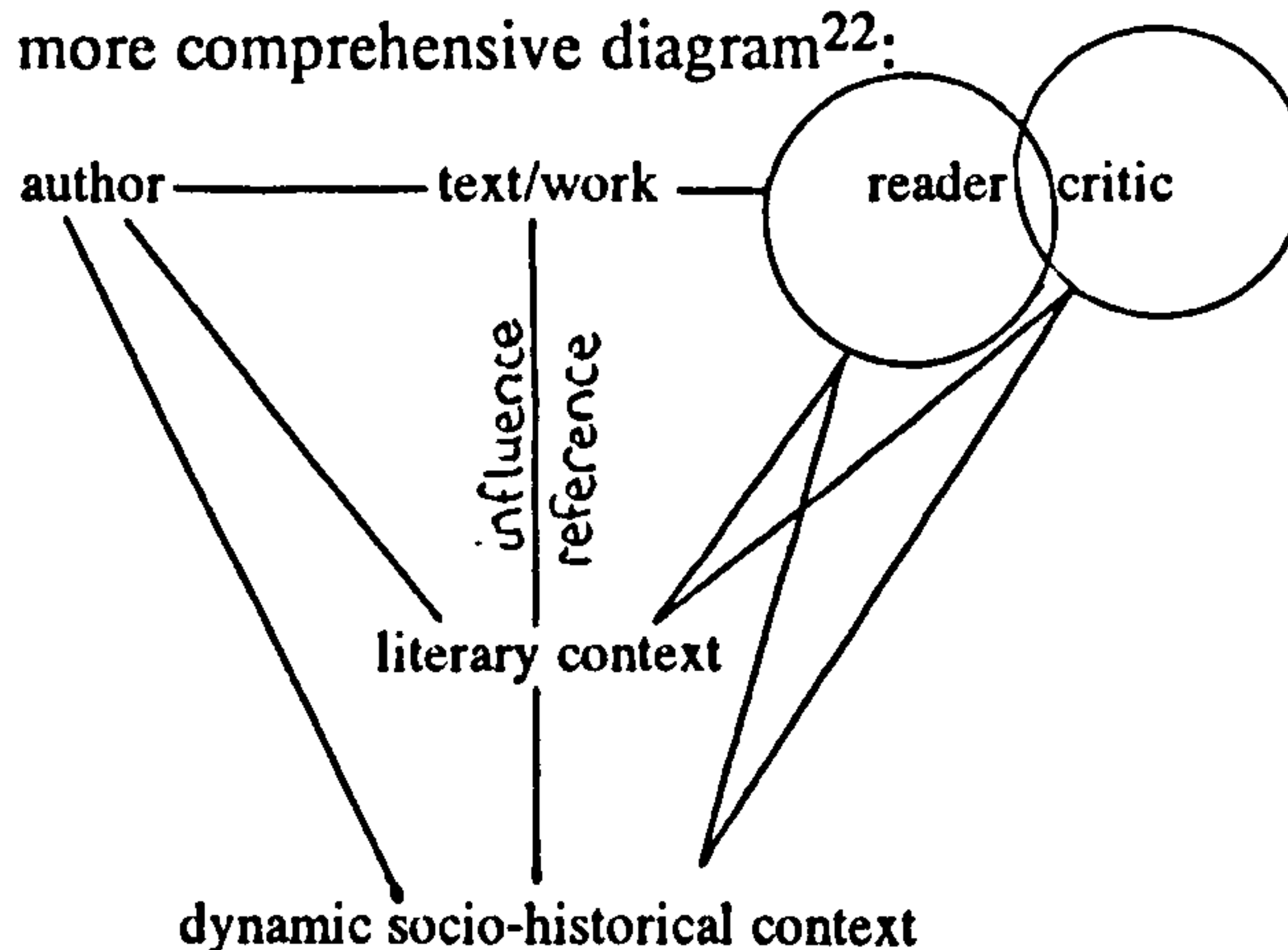
Secondly, a work is written within a certain horizon of expectation, and reconstruction of this horizon 'allows one to determine its artistic character by the kind and the degree of its influence on a presupposed audience' (ibid) (theses 3 and 4). Such an historical undertaking enables later readers to discern the questions that the text originally addressed, and thus

the philological question of how the text is 'properly' - that is, 'from its intention and time' - to be understood can best be answered if one foregrounds it against those works that the author explicitly or implicitly presupposed his contemporary audience to know (1988:225).

Thirdly, to fully understand a literary work the reader should consider how it fits into its 'literary series'. Literature has its own evolving history which affects and is influenced by general history, and it is the critic's task to explore how literary and general history interact (theses 5-7):

The gap between literature and history, between aesthetic and historical knowledge, can be bridged if literary history does not simply describe the process of general history in the reflection of its works one more time, but rather when it discovers in the course of 'literary evolution' that properly *socially formative* function that belongs to literature as it competes with other arts and social forces in the emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious, and social bonds (1988:226; author's emphasis).

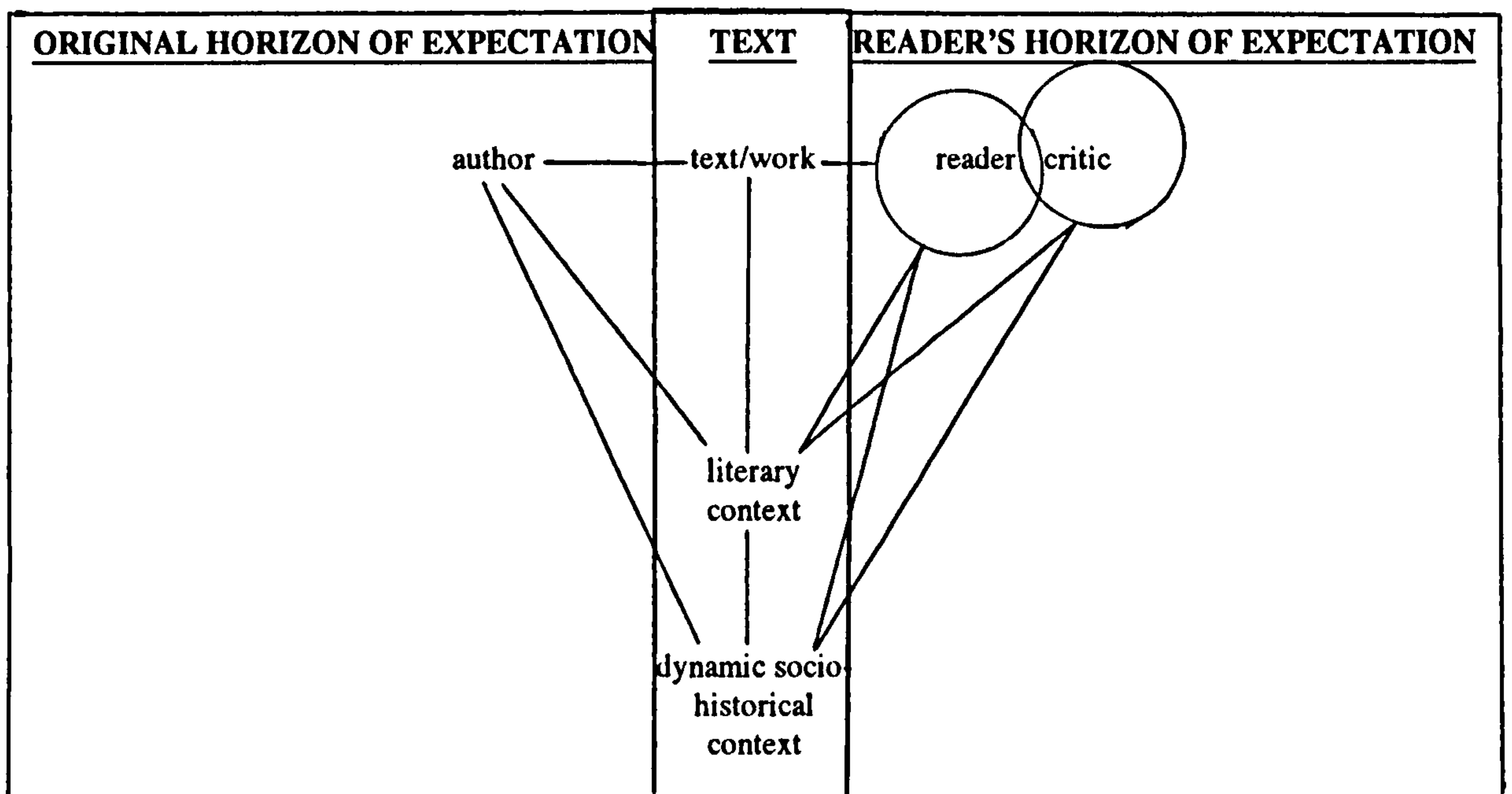
Jauss's essay makes clear that Abrams's diagram, which we reproduced above, is insufficient as a representation of the possible sources of meaning in a piece of language. Hawthorn (1987:9) offers a more comprehensive diagram<sup>22</sup>:



<sup>22</sup>Hawthorn (1987:8-9) wisely warns,

Like all such models this one has to be used with care if we wish to avoid being - in the words of George Eliot - ensnared by our metaphors. It is, for instance, potentially misleading to separate 'literary context' from 'socio-historical context', as the former is actually an aspect of the latter and inseparable from it. We can also posit that both the author and the literary and socio-historical contexts are in a sense 'in' the text as well as standing outside and apart from it.

The 'universe', in Abrams's model, is more fully represented here by 'literary context' and 'dynamic socio-historical context', which might be equated with Jauss's 'literary history' and 'general history'. Moreover, in Hawthorn's diagram we no longer find the 'work' at the centre with the other elements in orbit around it, rather there is a complicated network of interactions between the various elements. This better encapsulates the meaning of a piece of literature in terms of Reception Theory because meaning derives from the interaction in the text between the original horizon of expectation and the reader's horizon of expectation according to the place of text, author, and reader in literary and general history:



Meaning, then, is determined not by the author alone, nor by the reader alone, nor even by the text itself, but by the interaction of these three factors at any one moment in history (both literary and general).

### 1.2.3.2 Wolfgang Iser

Iser focuses his attention more sharply on the reader. For him meaning is specifically an effect which is experienced by the reader:

If texts actually possessed only the meaning brought to light by interpretation, then there would remain very little else for the reader. He could only accept or reject it, take it or leave it. The fundamental question is, however, what actually does take place between text and reader? ... it must be pointed out



that a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader (Newton, 1988:226-7).

However, the reader is not at liberty to create meaning at his or her whim because it is precisely the skeleton of *determination* in a text which constitutes the potential for the reader to produce meaning as (s)he fleshes out the bare bones by filling in the spots of *indeterminacy* in the text - what Iser calls 'concretization'<sup>23</sup> or 'actualization'. Hence meaning is not to be found either in the reader or in the text but emerges in the process of interaction between the two: the reader is constrained by the possibilities offered by the text, but is nonetheless free to 'pin down the oscillating structure of the text to some specific meaning' (Newton, 1988:228) according to his or her reaction to it:

the meaning of the text does not reside in the expectations, surprises, disappointments or frustrations that we experience during the process of gestalt-forming<sup>24</sup>. These are simply the reactions that take place when the gestalten are disturbed. What this really means, though, is that as we read, we react to what we ourselves have produced, and it is this mode of reaction that, in fact, enables us to experience the text as an actual event. We do not grasp it like an empirical object; nor do we comprehend it like a predicative fact; it owes its presence in our minds to our own reactions, and it is these that make us animate the meaning of the text as a reality (Iser, 1978:128-9).

We should note that Iser's 'concretization' is radically different from Hirsch's 'significance', because for Hirsch meaning exists in the text and takes on different significances for different readers, but for Iser there is no meaning in a text until the reader fills in the gaps of indeterminacy in order to produce some concrete meaning. However, although Iser's concept of 'meaning' is very different to Hirsch's, he does argue for a distinction between 'meaning' and 'significance' in terms highly reminiscent of Hirsch:

The significance of the meaning can only be ascertained when the meaning is related to a particular reference, which makes it translatable into familiar terms (1978:151-2).

### 1.2.3.3 Stanley Fish

It is on the issue of determinacy and indeterminacy that Fish disagrees most strongly with Iser, as is clear from Fish's article 'Why no one's afraid of Wolfgang Iser' (*Diacritics* 11/1, 1981:2-13; reproduced in extended form in Fish, 1989:68-86), and Iser's response,

<sup>23</sup>Both 'spots of indeterminacy' and 'concretization' are terms Iser borrows from Roman Ingarden, although both take on a slightly different meaning for Iser. See, for example, Iser, 1978:170-179.

<sup>24</sup>'Gestalt' in this context refers to the structure of a literary work.



'Talk like whales' (*Diacritics* 11/3, 1981:82-7)<sup>25</sup>. Fish maintains that Iser's theory 'falls apart because the distinction on which it finally depends - the distinction between the determinate and the indeterminate - will not hold' (1989:74). The judgment that something is determinate or indeterminate is part of the process of interpretation and reveals more about the presuppositions of the reader than about the text:

the distinction itself is an assumption which, when it informs an act of literary description, will *produce* the phenomena it purports to describe. That is to say, every component in such an account - the determinacies or textual segments, the indeterminacies or gaps, and the adventures of the reader's 'wandering viewpoint' - will be the products of an interpretative strategy that demands them, and therefore no one of those components can constitute the independent given which serves to ground the interpretive process (1989:77; his emphasis).

Thus, while Jauss considers meaning to arise from the interaction of past and present horizons of expectation; and Iser maintains that meaning is produced as the reader, guided by the determinate schemata of the text, fills in the spots of indeterminacy; for Fish meaning is located in the reader alone. He does away altogether with any notion of an objective work of literature and argues that everything in the text - grammar, form and meaning - is simply the result of interpretation. The consequence of this line of reasoning is that there is no distinction between different literary texts as such, the distinction is only in the interpretive approach to these texts:

the notions of the 'same' or 'different' texts are fictions. If I read *Lycidas* and *The Waste Land* differently (in fact I do not), it will not be because the formal structures of the two poems (to term them such is also an interpretive decision) call forth different interpretive strategies but because my predisposition to execute different interpretive strategies will *produce* different formal structures (Newton, 1988: 237; his emphasis).

Fish (1958:21) is therefore unperturbed by the arguments of Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'Affective Fallacy':

The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*) ... It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome ... is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear<sup>26</sup>.

His argument is precisely that the poem 'is' only in the sense of what it 'does' when it is interpreted, and that there is no 'poem itself, as an *object* of specifically critical judgment' [our em-

<sup>25</sup>Freund (1987:148-151) discusses this debate under the sub-title 'The indeterminacy of reader-response criticism'; Holub (1984:101-106) considers it in a section entitled 'Determinacy and the Fish-Iser debate'.

<sup>26</sup>In the appendix to *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (1972:383-427), entitled 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', Fish specifically addresses the questions raised by the Affective Fallacy. Indeed, one of his sub-titles is 'The Affective Fallacy Fallacy'.



phasis]. This implies that there is actually nothing that could be pinned down and labelled as the 'meaning' of a text because the text means only what is experienced by the reader, 'and that experience is immediately compromised the moment you say anything about it' (1972:425). Perhaps, then, 'meaning' is an inappropriate term to apply to literary texts, as Fish himself suggests (*ibid*) - although he continues to refer to it frequently.

When a readerly approach to literature is taken to this extreme it may be that the term 'ambiguity' also ceases to convey anything of critical value. Certainly if 'meaning' is an inappropriate term to apply to literary texts, 'ambiguity' is too; but also if the distinction between 'determinacy' and 'indeterminacy' is lost, so too is the distinction between 'unambiguous' and 'ambiguous': either everything is ambiguous because there is nothing that can be tied down as the meaning of a piece of language, or nothing is ambiguous because all meaning in a piece of language arises from the reader's interpretive experience. Perhaps what a text may achieve is to highlight some of the ambiguities in the reader's interpretive strategy rather than revealing *its* ambiguities. Applied to the case of Qohelet, we would then have to conclude that the book is not *itself* ambiguous, but that a study of secondary material (Fish's *Variorum* in the essay 'Interpreting the *Variorum*'<sup>27</sup>, which addresses this issue) would reveal the ambiguities in the different approaches to it. It is true that a comparison of different readings of Qohelet reveals a great deal about the presuppositions of the readers, and that the book appears to 'mean' very different things depending on the interpretive strategy of the reader<sup>28</sup>. However, this is not solely the result of interpretation: there is something in the 'marks on the page' which enables different readers to experience it differently, and our thesis is that the particular 'marks on the page' of which Qohelet is made up encourage different responses more than other 'marks on the page' precisely because of their ambiguity. The point is that readers are experiencing 'it' differently, and Fish's theory gives no explanation of what 'it' might be:

if intention, form, and the shape of the reader's experience are simply different ways of referring to (different perspectives on) the same interpretive act, what is that act an interpretation *of*? I cannot answer that question (1976:479; his emphasis).

<sup>27</sup> *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (1976), pp.478-485, reprinted in Newton, 1988:235-240.

<sup>28</sup> Thus Crenshaw states, 'It may be that in the last resort Qoheleth is a mirror which reflects the soul of the interpreter' (1983:51), and 'Research into the book also shows that it reflects the interpreter's world view' (1988:47). Bolton makes a similar comment about Job in *Semeia* 19 (1981), *The Book of Job and Ricoeur's Hermeneutics*: '... something very important which is so often made too little of: that the history of comments on the book of Job exhibits more of the commentators than of the text itself as sense and reference' (1981:87).

He maintains that nobody else can answer the question either, but acknowledges that 'formalists try to answer it by pointing to patterns and claiming that they are available independently of (prior to) interpretation' (1976:479). However, he goes on to point out that 'These patterns vary according to the procedures that yield them,' and this is amply illustrated in the formalist approaches to *Qohelet* which seem to reveal hugely varied patterns and structures in the book. Nonetheless, 'the marks on the page' remain and the reader is constrained by them, however (s)he organises them, so that his/her reading must take them into account if that reading is to offer anything which can be recognised as an interpretation of *Qohelet*. It is with Fish's stated thesis that 'the proper object of analysis is not the work but the reader' (1972:4) that we take issue, because if the focus is on the reader alone there ceases to be any real interpretation of a work, because there ceases to be anything which we can elucidate as 'meaning'. This does not necessarily suggest that Fish is wrong, what it does indicate is that we have set ourselves a different task - perhaps that we have adopted a different interpretive strategy.

#### 1.2.4 Reality and meaning

Of the four elements in Abrams's diagram - artist, work, text and universe - the only one we have not yet explicitly addressed is the last, the 'universe'. The 'universe' contains the concepts or realities or 'things-in-the-world' that we term 'signifieds', which are named by the sounds or words or 'marks on the page' that we term 'signifiers'. Thus the concept of a tree, in Hawkes's example (1977:25), is the thing in the 'universe' which is 'signified' by the word, or 'signifier', 'tree'. This 'universe', which we might also label 'reality', is divided by Longman (1987:18<sup>29</sup>) into 'historical events' and, of particular relevance to our thesis, 'theological ideas', and we might also include in the term the 'dynamic socio-historical context' in Hawthorn's diagram. In the author-, text- and reader-oriented approaches to meaning which we considered above (with the exception of Fish who in this regard is very close to Structuralism and Deconstructionism, and ought properly to be counted among the Post-Structuralists), meaning is in some way a reflection of the 'universe'. Whatever the source of meaning, be it

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<sup>29</sup>See also Barton, 1984:201.



authorial intention or textual form or reader's experience, it is worked out in relation to some concept of 'reality'.

For Husserl, whose philosophy Hirsch follows in his author-oriented approach to literature, language is an activity used to give names to meanings which we already possess. The language of a literary work, therefore, is simply the *expression* of a fixed meaning, and the task of criticism is to immerse itself in the 'world' of the text and to reproduce as accurately as it can the meaning that it finds there. Thus 'Criticism is not seen as a construction, an active interpretation of the work which will inevitably engage the critic's interests and biases; it is a mere passive reception of the text' (Eagleton, 1983:59).

However, if language is but a vehicle of meaning which can be passively absorbed, there must be some other source in which meaning resides and which gives to the phenomena the author records a meaning which the reader can receive. Husserl posits a system of universal 'essences', along similar lines to Plato's 'forms', which are given their meaning by a transcendental subject. These essences constitute part of the deep structure of human consciousness and it is such structures that Husserl's philosophy of Phenomenology claims to lay bare<sup>30</sup>.

Where for Husserl language is the vehicle for a pre-existent meaning, for Heidegger - as also for the New Critics - it is language which pre-exists, because without language, he argues, we cannot conceive of meaning. As Eagleton explains:

Heidegger does not think of language primarily in terms of what you or I might say: it has an existence of its own in which human beings come to participate, and only by participating in it do they come to be human at all. Language always pre-exists the individual subject, as the very realm in which he or she unfolds; and it contains 'truth' less in the sense that it is an instrument for exchanging accurate information than in the sense that it is the place where reality 'un-conceals' itself, gives itself up to our contemplation (1983:63).

'Meaning', in this respect, is reality as revealed by language - albeit a historical, existential 'reality' rather than Husserl's ahistorical transcendent 'reality'. Meaning, then, is not truly

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<sup>30</sup>See Husserl (1964). Neither Plato nor Husserl equate this super-ego with God, but it is clear nonetheless how such an approach to religious literature could be appropriated by biblical criticism if God is the Transcendental by which and in which the meaning of biblical texts is to be found. If God pervades the deep structures of human consciousness, perhaps a text's meaning can be passively received by the reader without reference to the human author of the text, and perhaps even beyond that author's human ability to intend. The result of this line of reasoning, regardless of how we define the transcendental subject, is that meaning moves from the author to the 'Author'.

found in the text *itself*; but in the 'reality' which it reveals. Moreover, the Author is reintroduced through the back door as Heidegger's contingent 'Being' (*Dasein*), which is our experience of the world in which we live<sup>31</sup>. This contingent Being could not be equated with the God of orthodox theology, but it may be relevant to interpretation from the perspective of Process Theology<sup>32</sup>.

Jauss's Reception Theory is greatly influenced by Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics. Gadamer, who was a student of Heidegger (who, in turn, was a student of Husserl - a pertinent observation because a thread of phenomenology can be traced through all three), developed Heidegger's concept of a contingent *Dasein* and insists on the historical nature of literary meaning<sup>33</sup>. As opposed to the New Critical exclusion of readerly input, Gadamer (and Jauss) insists that new meanings arise as the literary text passes from one cultural or historical context to the next, because it 'says' different things as the reader addresses different questions to it. Nonetheless, these different meanings which the reader perceives are still related to the historical horizon of the reader; and the reader's horizon is part of a continuing tradition connecting the past and the present. Hence, as the reader interacts with the 'reality' of this tradition, the 'universe' continues to be an important factor in the meaning of a text.

Similarly, the 'determinate schemata' in Iser's theory reflect a reality which constrains the reader as (s)he fills in the gaps of indeterminacy to produce meaning. Iser addresses this issue specifically when, after identifying literature with fiction, he asserts, 'fiction is a means of telling us something about reality' (1978:53), and adds that his approach focuses

on two basic, interdependent areas: one, the intersection between text and reality, the other, that between text and reader, and it is necessary to find some way of pinpointing these intersections if one is to gauge the effectiveness of fiction as a means of communication (1978:54).

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<sup>31</sup>See Heidegger (1962; 1971).

<sup>32</sup>For views on 'Old Testament Interpretation from a Process Perspective' see *Semeia* 24, which has this as its title. In their introductory essay Beardslee and Lull write,

A theory of interpretation may center upon one or more of several factors in the interpretive process: the world of reality with which the text deals, the author, the form of the text or the nature of language, and the reader of the text would be classical examples ... Most Old Testament interpretation from a process perspective has concentrated upon the first of these possible centers and has dealt primarily with a reconceptualizing of the transcendent God of the Old Testament in the direction of the process God of persuasion (p.1).

<sup>33</sup>See Gadamer (1975).



This is the very point at which Fish's abnegation of Iser's distinction between determinacy and indeterminacy strikes. In true post-structuralist style, he challenges the legitimacy of Iser's assertion that there is a determinate world to which the language of the text refers:

... the larger theory that stands behind Iser's pronouncements on merely literary matters [is] the theory by which the world itself is 'given' in a way that the world of literary (read fictional) works are not. It is only if the world - or 'reality' - is itself a determinate object, an object without gaps that can be grasped immediately, an object that can be perceived rather than read, that *indeterminacy* can be specified as a special feature of literary experience (1989:78; his emphasis).

Fish maintains that perception of the world, or reality, is always mediated by an interpretive strategy every bit as much as understanding of a literary text: in effect 'reality' is simply another text to be interpreted, and is no more a source of meaning than is any other text.

### 1.2.5 The structure of meaning

Structuralism shares Heidegger's (and Gadamer's) view of language as productive of meaning, but goes a step further (perhaps drawing Heidegger's philosophy to its logical conclusion) by severing the link between language and reality. One of the basic tenets of structuralist literary criticism is the assertion that the link between the signifier and the signified is totally arbitrary. The meaning of a word (and by extension of a whole text) is therefore determined not by its arbitrary connection with reality or our conception of reality, but solely in relation to other words - that is to say that meaning is not 'substantial' but 'relational'. Structuralism, as its name suggests, is concerned less with the elucidation of meaning than with explanation of the structures which produce meaning.

There are two planes on which the relationship between words can be determined, the 'syntagmatic' and the 'paradigmatic' (or 'associative'). The 'syntagmatic' dimension explores how a word (or phrase, or sentence, or paragraph, or chapter, etc.) relates to other words (phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc.) in a given text (or how a text relates to other texts within a given language) - what is often described as the horizontal plane<sup>34</sup>. Thus, in the sentence

The cat sat on the mat.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., Culler (1975:13); Hawkes (1977:26-28).

'cat' obtains its meaning from its relationship with 'the', which informs the reader that a particular cat is in mind; 'sat', by which we know the action it performed; and 'on', 'the' and 'mat', which together tell us where this action was performed by 'the cat'. It could still at this stage be argued that we know the meaning of all these words because of their connection with 'reality': we know what mats and cats look like, and we can conceive of definiteness and 'on-ness'. But according to structuralism this is a misconception. Our understanding of these words comes rather from their 'paradigmatic' relationship with other words in the overall structure of language (a 'synchronic' as opposed to a 'diachronic' perspective) - what is often termed the 'vertical plane'. Thus we know what the word 'cat' means in relation to and by its difference from other words such as 'dog', 'horse', 'cow', etc. This is one particular 'code', which could be called the 'animal code', and other codes could be indicated for each of the other words in the phrase:

<i>paradigmatic</i>	<i>syntagmatic</i> →					
↓	The	cat	sat	on	the	mat
	a	dog	lay	under	a	table
	one	man	settled	below	one	roof
	my	bear	reclined	against	my	chair
	your	elephant	stood	above	your	shed
	Bob's	lion	lounged	in	Bob's	grass
	this	monkey	sprawled	over	this	bed
	that	frog	crouched	beside	that	road
	etc...	etc...	etc...	etc...	etc...	etc...

Of course, this is grossly over-simplified. For example, 'the' could also be 'my', 'Bob's' and 'that' all at the same time; 'cat' is distinguished from the other animals in the above code because it is distinct from most of them, but it could also be the source of a sub-code of hyponyms which might include 'lion', 'kitten' and 'tom-cat'; 'cat' could also be part of a code of 'things-which-might-have-sat-on-the-mat' which might include 'stool', 'book', etc., and which would subtly change the meaning of 'sat'; 'cat' is also defined in terms of its relation to such words as 'hat' or 'bat' (and 'sat' and 'mat', of course) and 'car' or 'can' - and so we could go on through all the words in the phrase. Thus each word is part of a veritable web of relationships with other words. Moreover, this is what may be called a 'major-pattern sentence'<sup>35</sup> whose meaning is little changed by adjusting one word, for example from

<sup>35</sup>See Cotterell and Turner, 1989:191.



The cat sat on the mat

to

The cat sat on the table

or

The dog sat on the mat.

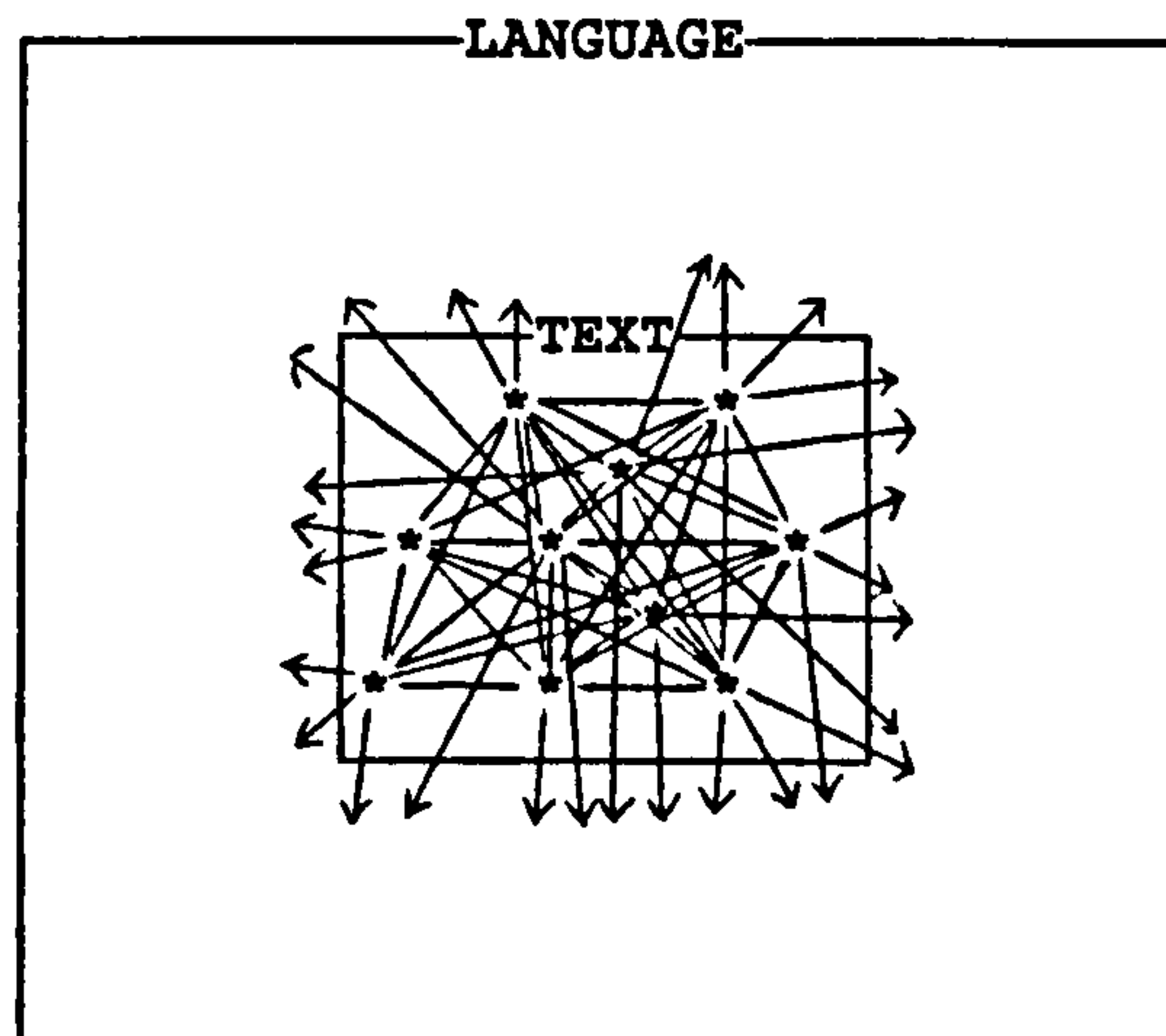
But the words in a 'minor-pattern sentence', which bear a specific meaning apart from the semantic structure of the string of words, relate to one another differently so that the meaning may be totally altered if one word is changed. Compare, for example, the phrase,

Not on your life

with

Not on your bed!

We might represent these relationships in this way:

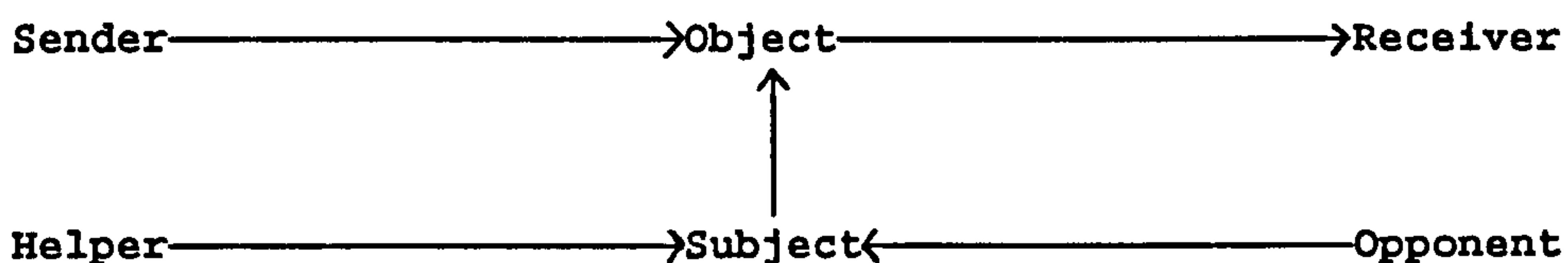


What this indicates is that the text is part of a closed system which is totally independent of the material world. The meaning of the text is therefore to be derived solely in terms of the inter-relations of the constituent parts of that closed system without any reference to the 'real' world. The role of the literary critic then becomes that of analysing this system to discover its rules and conventions, to discern the network of relations that produce meaning. Texts come

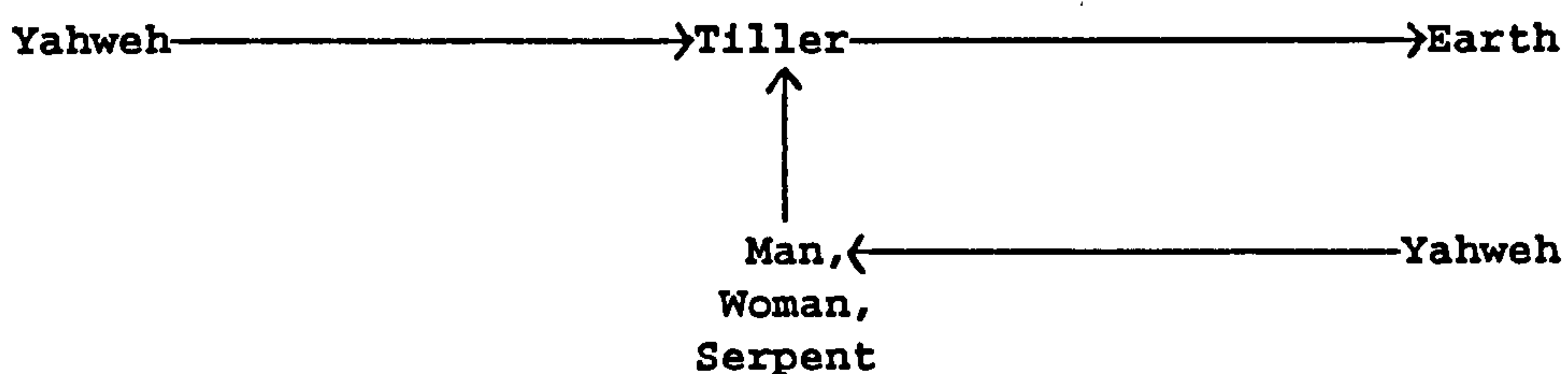


to have relevance only as instances of the overall structure of language<sup>36</sup>.

What this means in practice is that the meaning of the text, which is usually sought by the reader, is ignored in favour of the structures of language, so that, as is commonly acknowledged, 'structuralism is a calculated affront to common sense' (Eagleton, 1983:96). Olsen, in a book entitled *The Structure of Literary Understanding* (1978), criticises structuralism on precisely these grounds when he asserts that 'One objection to the view of the literary work as a semantic 'structural' unit is that this is simply not the way the reader sees it or understands it' (p.19). This is also apparent in biblical structuralist criticism. A striking example is Jobling's analysis of Genesis 2-3 where Greimas's 'actantial schema'



is used as the basis of analysis (1986b:24). Jobling proposes the following actantial scheme for 'getting a man to till the earth':



However, he admits that,

If one were to ask the average person literate in the Bible what happens in Gen. 2-3, the answer would probably be 'the fall' and 'the origin of sexuality and marriage' (i.e. 2:18-25), in that order of importance. *No one* senses that the text is about enabling vegetation by finding a gardener! (1986b:27; our emphasis)

<sup>36</sup>In terms borrowed from Saussure's theory of linguistics, explained in his book *Cours de Linguistique Generale* (English translation by Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, 1959), the 'instance' is termed *parole*, and the 'overall structure' is termed *langue*. Hawkes explains these terms using an illustration of Saussure's:

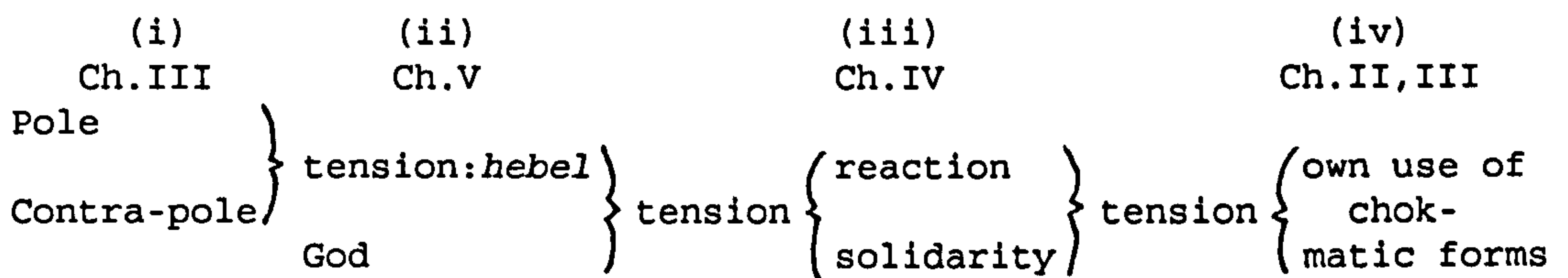
The distinction between *langue* and *parole* is more or less that which pertains between the abstract language system which in English we call simply 'language', and the individual utterances made by speakers of the language in concrete everyday situations which we call 'speech'. Saussure's own analogy is the distinction between the abstract set of rules and conventions called 'chess', and the actual concrete games of chess played by people in the real world. The rules of chess can be said to exist above and beyond each individual game, and yet they only ever acquire concrete form in the relationships that develop between the pieces in individual games (1977:20-21).

In fact, for the average reader such a rendering of this passage is sheer nonsense<sup>37</sup>.

Another example we might consider, which is particularly relevant to this thesis, is Loader's conclusion (1979:132-3) to *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*, in which he says,

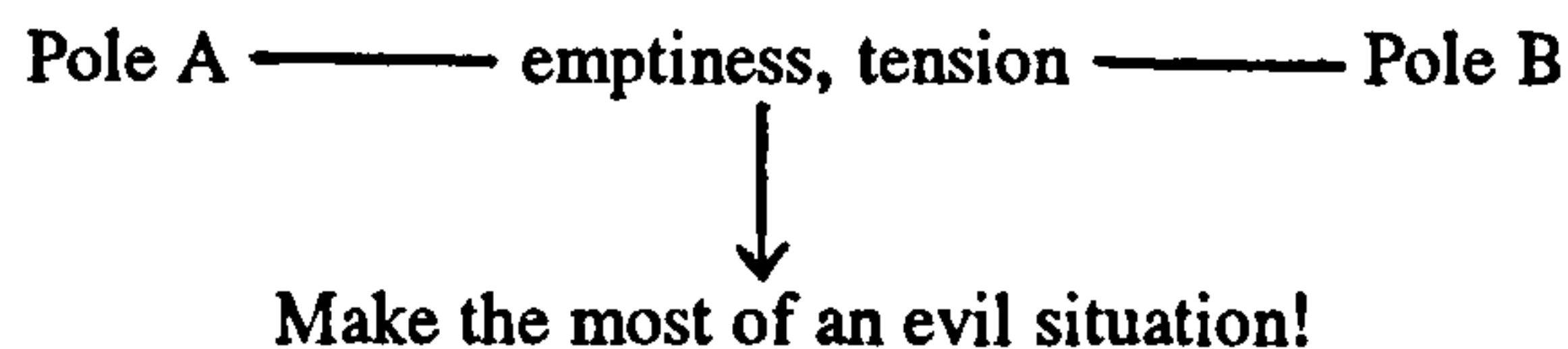
The conclusion of this study is that the literary face of the Book of Qohelet is determined by its polar structures, while the tension in these patterns can be explained by the overlapping of chokmatic and religio-historical developments (1979:132).

He then offers this scheme to illustrate his conclusion:



and explains it thus, 'I have argued that (iii) is the cause of (ii), which in turn is the cause of (i). The relation between these is constantly shown and confirmed by (iv).'

The fact that he needs to considerably simplify this for his commentary (1986:13) may serve to support Longman's argument that structuralist criticism tends to be 'obscurantist' (1987:49). In his commentary (1986:132) Loader concludes, 'Over and over in the book we saw one pole of thought in tension with another.' The outcome, and the message of the book, is then represented with this diagram:



Barton, however, maintains (1984:130-1) that while

At first sight one would have little hesitation in describing Loader's very original work as structuralist; and he himself stresses its interest in 'text-immanent' features rather than in the extrinsic, historical questions with which traditional biblical methods deal [and] his 'polar structures' are clearly an *avatar* of the structuralists' 'binary opposition', and his charts are a familiar part of structuralist equipment ... [yet] it seems to me only in a very qualified sense that we can call this a structuralist study ... In spite of its structuralist terminology it does not depend in any way on a characteristically structuralist view of literature; and it strikingly fails to share the structuralist indifference to authorial intention and to the historical

<sup>37</sup>A further example would be Polzin's summary (1977:75) of the message of Job with this mathematical type formula:

$$F_x(a):F_y(b) = F_x(b):F_{a-1}(y)$$



circumstances of composition. It is not necessarily the worse for that: but it is not structuralism in the strict sense. It merely adds structuralist ideas to the historical-critical tool-box<sup>38</sup>.

This directly contradicts Jefferson's view (Jefferson and Robey, 1986:92) that

Structuralism is revolutionary because it can be adopted only as an alternative and not as an addition to traditional academic habits. It cannot be incorporated as a handy extra methodological tool to be resorted to when all else fails.

However, Loader's book does illustrate how structuralism may be used in conjunction with other literary techniques to explore the text in greater depth. While structuralist criticism, in its strict sense, is simply the study of structures and does nothing to elucidate 'meaning' in literature, the 'close reading' of the text that it involves, its emphasis on paradigmatic as well as syntagmatic study, and the attempt to discern structure in the relation of a text's constituent parts, all make a structuralist approach to the text worthwhile because it may assist the interpreter to discern possibilities for meaning. In this sense it may well be used as a 'handy extra methodological tool'.

#### 1.2.6 The deconstruction of meaning

One of the greatest benefits of structuralism for literary criticism is the development of new literary theories in reaction to it. Deconstruction is one of the most intriguing of these developments. In its most basic form (as proposed by Derrida<sup>39</sup>) deconstruction, like structuralism before it, denies both authorial intention and reader response a role in determining the meaning of a text - the statement for which Derrida is probably best known is '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' ('There is nothing outside the text'). Deconstruction presupposes structuralism, but where structuralist criticism confidently builds up structures and systems, deconstructionist criticism overturns them by showing their internal contradictions. As Culler (1982:219) writes,

<sup>38</sup>Barton goes on to offer his own 'structuralism-as-theory' treatment of the book. He says, we could sketch a treatment of Ecclesiastes that adhered more closely to the pure structuralist gospel without offering a new *interpretation* of it at all. We could begin by merely stating the data with which any interpretation whatever has to cope, and then analysing what the process of interpretation involves (1984:131).

<sup>39</sup>Gray (1984:61) suggests that

Many of the ideas of deconstruction originate in three books by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, all of which were published in France in 1967 and have been translated into English with the following titles: *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), *Of Grammatology* (1976) and *Writing and Difference* (1978).

Rorty (Eco, 1992:101) maintains that Derrida and de Man are the two people who give prestige to deconstruction. Rorty himself is more in line with Fish, and describes himself as a 'pragmatist'.

deconstruction arrives in the wake of structuralism to frustrate its systematic projects...[it] shatters their 'faith in reason' by revealing the uncanny irrationality of texts and their ability to confute or subvert every system or position they are thought to manifest. Deconstruction, by these lights, reveals the impossibility of any science of literature or science of discourse and returns critical inquiry to the task of interpretation.

Deconstruction is, then, the ultimate in exclusively *text*-based literary criticism because it seeks to explore *all* the implications of the text on their own merit, and employs the presuppositions underlying the text to thwart its own purposes. It is, in this regard, the logical result of the task which the New Critics set themselves: disinterested study of the text itself.

As a philosophy, deconstruction examines the hierarchies that make up social structures and indicates how these hierarchies can be reversed and how the social framework (or the 'deep structures' of society which structuralism claims to disclose) is disrupted as a result. Derrida (1977:236) draws attention to some simple examples of these hierarchies, or 'oppositions', in which the first term is seen as prior: 'good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation'<sup>40</sup>. He then argues that all metaphysicians 'from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl' have proceeded on the basis that the first term in each opposition is 'simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical', and the second a 'derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc.' But if these hierarchies are reversed, the whole system that is founded on them is called into question. Culler (1982:88) employs the example of 'cause and effect' to illustrate how such a reversal is achieved:

If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin. By showing that the argument which elevates cause can be used to favor effect, one uncovers and undoes the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchization and one produces a significant displacement. If either cause or effect can occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary, it loses its metaphysical privilege.

When applied to literature, deconstruction involves showing how a text undermines the philosophy it asserts by reversing the hierarchical oppositions on which its arguments rely. Rather than seeking unity in the text - which is the usual goal of exegesis, of Qohelet as much as of any other text - deconstruction probes the text to tease out the stress points where it will

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<sup>40</sup>Other hierarchies in our society which might be very interesting to explore further include male/female (to which Culler - 1982:43-64 - devotes a very interesting and provocative section of his book, and which Jobling - 1986b:40-43 - also touches on although with considerably less force than Culler!), white person/black person, employed/unemployed, employer/employee, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.



burst open and reveal readings which contradict the supposed ground of the text. In Barbara Johnson's words (1980:5), it is 'the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text'. By focusing on these points in the text, deconstruction allows the text to speak with several contradictory voices rather than trying to squeeze all its constituent parts into one univocal reading as previous literary theories have done. It explores all the logical implications of the language used in the text, and to achieve this Derrida asserts that 'the motif of homogeneity, the theological motif par excellence, is what must be destroyed' (1981:64). Also, where interpretation generally attempts to determine what is the core of the text and tends to rely on distinctions between the central and the marginal, the essential and the inessential, deconstruction reverses these hierarchies so that the implications of the whole of the text are allowed to speak out, regardless of their relation to the supposed core<sup>41</sup>.

In this sense deconstruction is also a logical progression from the study of ambiguity in literature, because it seeks to explore the implications of 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (Empson, 1953:1). It also shows the ultimate futility of a solely text-based approach to meaning in literature: by drawing out all the implications of the language of a literary work (at least this is the goal - it is, however, an impossible undertaking), deconstruction reveals endless possibilities for the meaning of a piece of language<sup>42</sup> and makes clear the need for an interpretive strategy to fix something that can usefully be described as the 'meaning' of a text. In other words, if it is meaning we seek, the text itself is not enough to provide that meaning.

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<sup>41</sup>Clines's chapter 'Deconstructing the Book of Job' in *What Does Eve Do to Help?* (1990:106-123) is an example of the application of deconstruction to biblical studies. Clines relates the practice of deconstruction to readerly concerns when he says:

When a text has been deconstructed, what happens next? This is a question not often raised by professional deconstructionists, who tend to believe in a never-ending spiral of deconstructions, but it is a pressing question for many other readers, who cannot bear too much dizziness and nausea (1990:121).

He suggests:

What sustains a book's life beyond its deconstruction is its rhetoric, that is, its power to persuade beyond the bounds of pure reason, its ability to provoke readers into willing its success even beyond its deserts (1990:121).

See also J. D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Falls: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1980); *Semeia* 23 (1982), entitled *Derrida and Biblical Studies*; P. D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and G. Aichele, Jr., *The Limits of Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>42</sup>Culler (Eco, 1992:120-1) argues that deconstruction

stresses that meaning is context bound - a function of relations within or between texts - but that context itself is boundless: there will always be new contextual possibilities that can be adduced, so that the one thing we *cannot* do is to set limits. [His emphasis]

Essentially, deconstruction, like structuralism, is a philosophical discipline which explores the philosophical systems on which social structures are built: structuralism seeks to elucidate these systems, while deconstruction seeks out the flaws to show how these systems are self-contradictory. The end results of both disciplines are therefore philosophical rather than literary in the same way that psychoanalytical and Freudian theories of literature tend to psychological ends, and Marxist theory tends to socio-economic or political ends. Of course, the same criticism could be leveled at historical criticism - does it tell us more about history and society than it does about the text?

But, again like structuralism, deconstruction can be 'a handy extra methodological tool', providing it is part of a broader methodology which enables the reader to make sense of the text. Its probing into the presuppositions on which the text is based gives insight into what the ground of the text is, and even if these hierarchies are finally re-established, a greater understanding will have been achieved of how they operate and what alternatives might be possible. Moreover, the plurivocity of the text which deconstruction reveals opens the text to the possibility of different readings and prepares the way for a reader-oriented approach to the text.

### 1.3 Interpretive strategy - meaning and ambiguity

It should be clear from the above discussion that the meaning of 'meaning' can no longer (if it ever could) be taken for granted. Nor, it seems, can it be taken for granted that the literary critic's task is to elucidate the meaning of literary texts: arguments about what a literary critic *ought* to do will, no doubt, continue for a long time (probably as long as literary criticism is practised<sup>43</sup>), as also will arguments about what are *proper* goals of biblical criticism<sup>44</sup>. However, this thesis sets out specifically to study the possibilities for interpretation of Qohelet, not necessarily with the aim of finding a single unified meaning, but rather with the goal of exploring the range of possible meanings of the book. The particular empha-

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<sup>43</sup>Although some scholars seem to suggest that post-modernism is 'the end of literary criticism'. See, e.g., Spanos (Newton, 1988:199) and Culler's criticism of Rorty (Eco, 1992:117-20).

<sup>44</sup>See, e.g., the conclusion in Barton (1984:198-207); Morgan & Barton (1988), particularly chs.8,9 (pp.269-296); and Eco (1992), which focuses on the proper goals of literary criticism.



sis will be on the ambiguities of the book, and how they encourage the reader to play an active role in determining meaning. We shall explore in what ways the book is ambiguous, and consider whether the text readily lends itself to radically different interpretations - and whether this might have been intended by the author. This is a new approach to the book which does not seek to deny the value of previous approaches, but rather seeks to explore how the active involvement of the reader in the production of meaning might increase our appreciation of this difficult book. Rather than attempting to squeeze Qohelet into a univocal mould, as has been done previously, this thesis will explore something of its plurivocity, because it seems that any univocal reading strains under the pressure of other voices crying out to be heard. It will be shown that this book, more than most biblical books, is susceptible to different readings depending on the approach of the reader - specifically because much of the text is ambiguous. It will also be suggested that this may be a deliberate technique adopted by the author (although the possibility is not ruled out that some of the ambiguity has resulted from editorial activity, errors in the transmission of the text, or the difficulty of trying to interpret the text at some two thousand and more years distance, with little knowledge of its cultural setting).

However, while there is a greater focus on the role of the *reader* than is usual in biblical interpretation in general<sup>45</sup> and study of Qohelet in particular<sup>46</sup>, both *author* and *universe* will also be considered as important in determining the meaning of the *text*. The reason why this approach has been adopted is because this is how readers usually address the book: they come to the text with the express purpose of discovering what *it* means - but they also come to it with their interpretive strategy already in place, and this affects their reading whether they like it or not, and whether they realise it or not; they also seek to discover what the author intended when (s)he wrote the text, and how that meaning relates to the universe as they know it, and - so far as they can determine - as the author knew it. To this end, Qohelet will be read as it is found in its canonical form. This does not deny the value of historical critical approaches to the Bible, nor does it imply an acceptance of Childs's canonical criticism. Rather it acknowledges the fact that historical criticism is an endless task which produces few

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<sup>45</sup>But see, for example, Clines (1990), and McKnight (1985), especially ch.5 (pp.115-134), and McKnight (1988).

<sup>46</sup>But see Good's (1978) approach to Qohelet 1:1-12.

definitive results, and the reader or commentator can never be one hundred percent certain of the origin and development of any biblical text, least of all Qohelet. The issue of editorial additions to, or emendations of, the text will be considered from time to time, however, because it may appear to any reader that some parts of the text seem unlikely to have come from the hand of the 'implied author' of the bulk of the text. But this can be, and often is, an easy way to avoid tackling certain tensions in the text and for the most part this thesis will address the text of Qohelet as it is found in BHS: we shall explore how difficult passages *might* be understood - even when they appear grammatically incorrect or semantically incoherent or incomplete - rather than searching for possible emendations. It is noteworthy that there are a number of such passages whose interpretation has an important bearing on how the whole book is understood: it is also noteworthy that commentators have translated such passages very differently depending on their understanding of the book as a whole. This is a key element in the ambiguity of Qohelet.

In the reading of any text some parts of that text will be foregrounded and others marginalised and perhaps our approach is similar to deconstruction insofar as we shall explore the margins to show how centralising the margins of one reading may produce a very different reading where the central aspects of the first reading themselves become marginalised. However, it will be demonstrated that in Qohelet what is centred and what is marginalised depends very largely on the interpretive strategy of the reader<sup>47</sup>, and that the ambiguity of the text encourages the reader to choose what should be central and what should be marginal.

It will not be accepted that Qohelet can be read however the reader wants to read it. The reader is constrained by what can be discerned from the text of authorial intention, and

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<sup>47</sup>Fish would maintain that such is the case with any text: if that were true, then our case still stands on the grounds that the *process* of foregrounding and marginalising may be more obvious to the reader in Qohelet than it is in other texts. From this perspective ambiguity has particular interest because it helps the reader to appreciate the process that occurs all the time in reading: if the reader perceives a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter or complete text as ambiguous, he or she may also be aware of the processes whereby he or she decides how to resolve the ambiguity. McKnight (1988:223-4) addresses this issue when he writes,

Readers assume that a text makes sense as a linguistic and literary unit and intuitively use their linguistic and literary competence in the process of actualization. When ambiguity arises, a reader becomes conscious of the process that is being followed ... In the processing of the text, then, the reader will discover that the text (intentionally and unintentionally) does not (indeed, *cannot*) make explicit all that must be known to make sense of the text. [His emphasis]



also by the structure and determinate schemata within the text<sup>48</sup>. Fish is right to argue that the structures we find and the determinate schemata we reveal - and also, no doubt, the authorial intention we discern - will all depend to some extent on the way we approach the text, or the questions we address to it. Nonetheless, there are marks on the page, and they do more readily lend themselves to certain patterns than to others, and they do reflect certain 'realities' or aspects of the universe more than others, so that a reader has the right to expect an interpretation to reflect certain textual, realistic and authorial norms. This thesis will also, therefore, explore the possibility of setting up objective criteria by which to assess the validity of different interpretations of the text. Moreover, there are undoubtedly possible interpretations relevant to a late twentieth century reader which could not have been intended by the author some two thousand years and more previously. For this reason, the distinction between 'meaning' and 'significance' may be employed to distinguish between the meanings which are embodied in the text, and the significances which arise as a later reader gives voice to those meanings in terms which are appropriate to his or her situation. Nonetheless, it must be realised that latent meanings in the text can *only* ever bear meaning for the reader as they are given a contemporary significance, and hence the distinction between meaning and significance is not always so easily drawn. By meaning, then, we shall indicate that which a reader may discern of what *could* have been meant by the author - so far as we can determine from the text itself in conjunction with our knowledge of the possible provenance of the book (by which we acknowledge our debt to historical criticism). Latent meaning is given voice as the *reader* addresses the *text* from her/his unique perspective, but also within the constraints placed on her/him by what she/he can discern of what the *author* might have intended - in this instance, as indeed in most others, mostly from the text itself<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup>To this extent we agree with Eco (1992:40) when he says, 'What I want to say is that there are somewhere criteria for limiting interpretation.' He continues (1992:65), 'the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.'

<sup>49</sup>The opening words of the conclusion to Morgan and Barton's *Biblical Interpretation*, sub-titled 'texts, authors, and readers' (1988:269-70), offer a useful summary of the approach, or interpretive strategy we have adopted:

A text has no life of its own. It 'lives' only as an electric wire is alive. Its power originates elsewhere: in a human author. There is another point of comparison: however powerful the author's act of creation, the text lies impotent until it also comes into contact with a human reader. Only then can the human power, imagination, and intellect carried by the marks on a page strike a light, communicate warmth, or give a nasty shock.

The medium itself is important, and determines how much of the source's power is communicated. Old wires can give unreliable service and cause accidents. But it is the source that gives the wire its potential for illumination or destruction. Without this, there is no live wire. Once this is present,



Of the various approaches to the meaning of literary texts which we considered above, this thesis is probably closest to the Reception Theory/Reader Response Theory of Wolfgang Iser. It assumes that there is something in the text which to some extent determines meaning, and this is largely the result of authorial activity. However, the reader is required to actualise this meaning, and in so doing he or she fills in the indeterminacies of the text according to his or her interpretive strategy (conscious and, mostly, unconscious<sup>50</sup>). In the case of Qohelet, the reader is given a major role because so much of the text is indeterminate due to its ambiguities.

'Ambiguity' will be understood as those aspects of the text - be it a word, phrase, sentence, or longer piece of text, including the whole book - whose indeterminacy requires the reader to fill in the meaning in order for a coherent reading to be produced. However, the scope of this ambiguity will be limited precisely by what we can discern of the determinate schemata in the book. Thus only those ambiguities will be considered important which require the reader's active participation in the production of a coherent reading of the whole book - although more minor ambiguities will be noted in passing. This means that we have chosen to define 'ambiguity' in a way that is useful to the purposes of our thesis and meaningful to those who read it, and perhaps by so doing we may be accused of restricting the ambiguous nature of the term<sup>51</sup>. Of course, we have also chosen to pin down the meaning of 'meaning' so that it fulfils a useful purpose and also can be clearly understood by those who read this thesis. On

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however, those at the receiving end are in control. It is they who decide what to do with the powerful resource they possess - whether and how to use it. They have all power in their hands.

...[However,] for all the emphasis which literary criticism now places on the reader, common sense continues to look for the grammatical meaning of the text, on the assumption that this usually corresponds to the intention of the writer. Even after two generations of emphasizing the text at the expense of the author, the natural instinct is to ask what the speaker or writer intended.

<sup>50</sup>The importance of this observation was brought home by a remark overhead at a recent SOTS conference (Summer, 1994): David Clines, in informal discussion following a series of lectures on Feminist Criticism, made a remark to the effect that all biblical readings, whether by men or women, are from a male perspective, unless they are *consciously* otherwise.

<sup>51</sup>We certainly use the term more restrictively than, e.g., Page (1985:13), who says, 'I propose to use Ambiguity, capitalized to indicate the whole metaphysical view, as an umbrella term for the three [diversity, change, polyvalence], and for the conditions which they create.' As a result, she argues (1985:32) that '*Everything* we experience - humanity and its artefacts, animate and inanimate nature - is ambiguous' [our emphasis]. It is also more restrictive than Empson (1953:1) who says, 'I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.'



both counts there may be those who would find us culpable, but we plead our case on the grounds that unless these terms are carefully defined they may cease to serve any useful critical purpose, rather signifying whatever the interpreter wants them to signify regardless of how they are understood by his or her readers.

In order to appreciate the importance of the ambiguities in Qohelet, then, we ought first to explore the determinate schemata in the text - in true New Critical fashion to seek some objective criteria - against which the ambiguities may be set. It is to this task we turn in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 2, The Overall Structure of Qohelet

In an oft-cited passage from his nineteenth century commentary, *Canticles and Ecclesiastes*, (English translation by M. G. Easton, 1877), Delitzsch writes about Qohelet: 'All attempts to show, in the whole, not only oneness of spirit, but also a genetic progress, an all-embracing plan, and an organic connection, have hitherto failed, and must fail' (p.188)<sup>1</sup>. This is a view which has been shared by many commentators since Delitzsch<sup>2</sup>, and is also prevalent in recent studies of Qohelet<sup>3</sup>. However, despite Delitzsch's warning, there have been many attempts to delineate a definitive structure to the book<sup>4</sup>, and this trend, too, is to be found in recent studies of Qohelet<sup>5</sup>. There is a huge range of quite diverse structures proposed, and, as Whybray advises, 'The very wide divergence of scholarly opinion on this question should warn the interpreter of the need for caution' (1989b:19). The point is well-illustrated by comparing six very different outlines of the supposed structure.

### 2.1 Examples of suggested overall structures for Qohelet

#### 2.1.1 Loader's polar structures

Loader provides our first example. In his book *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (1979) Loader sets out, in structuralist fashion, to show 'that the literary face of the Book of Qohelet is determined by its polar structures' (1979:136)<sup>6</sup>. The supposed contradictions in the book, which have so exercised the minds of its commentators<sup>7</sup>, do not present a problem to Loader:

<sup>1</sup>Cited, for example, in Galling, 1932:277; Wright, 1968:314; Loader, 1979:4; Caneday, 1986:31; Ogden, 1987:11; Michel, 1988:10; Whybray, 1989b:44; de Jong, 1992:107.

<sup>2</sup>Wright provides a useful list of such commentators (1968:314).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Eaton (1983:48-51); Viviano (1984:80); Ogden (1987:11-13); Crenshaw (1988:34-49); Whybray (1989a:17-22); Fox (1989:155-62); Murphy (1992:lv; 1993:128-30).

<sup>4</sup>Again Wright (1968:315-7) offers a useful summary of outlines of the books structure suggested pre-1968. Also useful in this regard is Ellermeier's study (1967:131-41), and for more up to date resumés see Schoors (1982:91-8); Crenshaw (1988:34-49); Michel (1988:21-45); and Murphy (1992:xxxv-xli).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Loader (1979:112); Lohfink (1979:267-9; see also the commentary, 1980); Rousseau (1981:209-15); Bergant (1982:227); Caneday (1986:34); Murphy (1988:128); Brown (1990:196-8); de Jong (1992:108).

<sup>6</sup>Loader's polar structures, and the extent of his 'structuralism', are discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>7</sup>For a summary, see 'Excursus I: Approaches to the Contradictions in Qohelet' in Fox's book entitled *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (1989:19-28). Ellul's sub-section entitled 'Contradiction as an Essential Principle of Qohelet' (1990:39-42) provides another perspective. See our comments in the conclusion to this thesis.



Excepting the epilogue, not a single palpable contradiction can be found in the book. The 'contradictions' that caused the rabbis so much brain-racking and that can be eliminated so skilfully by critics are nothing other than intended polar structures (1979:133).

The study of these polar structures leads Loader (1979:112) to propose the following overall structure for the book of Qohelet:

1:1	Heading		
1:2-11	Prologue		
1:12-2:26	Worthlessness of wisdom		Self-introduction
3:1-9	Eventualities of life ('et)		
3:10-15	Labour without product		'et
3:16-22	The inhuman human		'et; formulary conjunction
4:1-3	The inhuman human		formulary conjunction
4:4-6	Labour without product		formulary conjunction
4:7-12	Labour without product		formulary conjunction
4:13-16	Worthlessness of wisdom		motif of the eventualities
4:17-5:8	Talk and silence		
5:9-6:9	Worthlessness of wealth		
6:10-12	Talk and silence		motif of human ignorance
7:1-4	Life and death		motif of wisdom/folly; tob
7:5-7	Worthlessness of wisdom		tob-formulation
7:8-10	Talk and silence		motif of wisdom/folly; tob
7:11-14	Worthlessness of wisdom		tob
7:15-22	Worthlessness of wisdom		introductory formula with tob
7:23-8:1	Worthlessness of wisdom		introductory formula with tob
8:2-9	Political power(lessness)		
8:10-15	No retribution		formulary introduction
8:16-17	Worthlessness of wisdom		ignorance of <i>h<sup>a</sup>kamim</i>
9:1-10	No retribution		<i>h<sup>a</sup>kamim</i> (v.1); ignorance
9:11-12	Worthlessness of wisdom		
9:13-10:1	Worthlessness of wisdom		
10:2-7	Worthlessness of wisdom		
10:8-11	Worthlessness of wisdom		
10:12-15a	Talk and silence		
10:16-20	Talk and silence		
11:1-6	Risk and assurance		
11:7-12:8	<i>Carpe diem</i>		
12:9-14	Epilogue		

### 2.1.2 Lohfink's palindrome

Lohfink (1979:267-9) proposes a very different structure when he studies Qohelet as an example of a Greek palindrome, the structure of which he represents thus:

1,2f	Rahmen	
1,4-11	I. Kosmologie	
1,12-3,15	II. Anthropologie	
3,16-4,16	III. Gesellschaftskritik, erster Teil	
4,17-5,6	IV. Ethik des religiösen Verhaltens	
5,7-6,10	V. Gesellschaftskritik, zweiter Teil	
6,11-9,6	VI. Ideologiekritik	
9,7-12,7	VII. Ethik	
12,8	Rahmen	

He claims authority (1979:269) for this structure because,

Diese Disposition ist, wie die bisherigen Anmerkungen zeigen, *aufgrund objektiver Hinweise im Text selbst erkennbar*, wobei im einzelnen natürlich größere oder geringere Sicherheit erreichbar ist. [Our emphasis]

Lohfink regards Qohelet as highly influenced by Greek literary style, and explains the supposed contradictions in the book as the result of a diatribe in which negative statements are set up as an 'Aunt Sally' so that they can be knocked down by positive affirmations.

### 2.1.3 Rousseau's cycles

Rousseau (1981:209) makes a similar claim to Lohfink's 'objectivity' when he states,

Notre intention n'est pas d'imposer, mais bien de *dégager* une structure, la structure du texte, et cela au moyen d'indices littéraires *trouvés dans le texte*. [Our emphasis]

Rousseau also divides Qohelet into seven parts with framing passages at beginning and end<sup>8</sup>. However, his seven inter-connected 'cycles', each of which ends with what he terms 'le grand refrain' (1981:213) that urges enjoyment, divide the book quite differently from Lohfink's seven sections (1981:213):

A	I	Confession du roi Salomon (1,12-2,26)
B	II	Le sage ignore le dessein de Dieu en général (3,1-13)
	III	Le sage ignore ce qui arrivera après la mort (3,14-22)
C	IV	Déceptions diverses et exhortations (4,1-5,19)
	V	Déceptions diverses et exhortations (6,1-8,15)
B'	VI	La faiblesse du sage (8,16-9,10)
C'	VII	Déceptions et exhortations (9,11-11,10)

The refrain, Rousseau claims, 'fait ressortir le caractère optimiste de l'ensemble de l'oeuvre' (1981:217).

The frame within which the cycles are enclosed is in the form of a chiasmus: 1:1 Rousseau regards as the title (A), 1:2-3 as the theme (B), and 1:4-11 as the prologue (C); 12:1-7 forms an epilogue (C'), 12:8 is a restatement of the theme (B'), and 12:9-14 is a redactional note to balance the title (A'). It should be noted, though, that while Lohfink and Rousseau both propose a frame round the body of the book, they disagree on precisely which verses constitute that frame. We might compare the divisions proposed by these two commentators thus:

<sup>8</sup>Rousseau, nevertheless, expresses approval of Loader's work: he concludes his article by saying, 'A notre point de vue, le livre de Loader reste précieux surtout à cause des nombreuses péripécies dont il a étudié avec soin la structure' (1981:217).



	<u>Lohfink</u> (1979, 1980)	<u>Rousseau</u> (1981)
frame	1:1-2	1:1-11
section/cycle 1	1:4-11	1:12-2:26
section/cycle 2	1:12-3:15	3:1-13
section/cycle 3	3:16-4:16	3:14-22
section/cycle 4	4:17-5:6	4:1-5:19
section/cycle 5	5:7-6:10	6:1-8:15
section/cycle 6	6:11-9:6	8:16-9:10
section/cycle 7	9:7-12:7	9:11-11:10
frame	12:8	12:1-14

From this comparison it may be noted that only once do the two divide at the same verse: at the end of the first section for Lohfink, while it concludes the opening 'frame' for Rousseau.

#### 2.1.4 Wright's numerical patterns

Wright (1968:313) quotes Plumptre's comment on Qohelet that, 'It comes before us as the sphinx of Hebrew literature, with its unsolved riddles of history and life' (Plumptre, 1898:7), and claims that, at least so far as the structure of the book is concerned, he has solved 'the riddle of the sphinx'<sup>9</sup>. Wright is unashamedly New Critical in his approach, although he recognises the importance also of authorial intention:

The New Criticism in its pure form is of course a reaction to other schools of criticism and needs to be balanced by them, especially (for our purposes) whenever it exhibits a tendency to view as secondary the meaning the author intended to give to his work (1968:317-8).

The value of the New Critical approach for Wright is that it offers 'what we might call an objective method' (1968:318) - precisely what was claimed by Lohfink, and is implied in Rousseau's article. However, Wright's 'objective' methodology produces results which differ significantly from those of his predecessors and later writers like Lohfink and Rousseau. In his first article (1968), he divides Qohelet into three parts according to different phrases marking the end of the sections within those three parts: the sections in 1:12-6:9 all end '(vanity and) a chase after wind'; the sections in 7:1-8:17 all end 'not find out/who can find out'; and the sections in 9:1-11:6 all end 'do not know/no knowledge'. 1:12-6:9 is 'Qoheleth's Investigation of Life', while 6:10-11:6 is 'Qoheleth's Conclusions', and the verses at the beginning and end form a frame round these two central parts of the book, although it should be noted

<sup>9</sup>See Wright's three articles 'The Riddles of the Sphinx: the Structure of the Book of Qoheleth' (1968), 'The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth' (1980), and 'Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth' (1983).

that this frame differs from both Lohfink's and Rousseau's. In his two later articles Wright supports his earlier findings by reference to intricate numerical patterns he finds in the book. This is the outline he presents of Qohelet in view of these findings (1980:49; 1983:34):

	Title (1:1)		1		
	Poem on Toil (1:2-11)		10		
	Double introduction	(1:12-15)	4	18	
		(1:16-18)	3		
	I. Qoheleth's Investigation of Life	(2:1-6:9)			
	Study of pleasure seeking	(2:1-11)	11		
	Study of wisdom and folly	(2:12-17)	6	111	
	Study of the fruits of toil				
	one has to leave them to				
	another	(2:18-26)	9	93	
	one cannot hit on the right				
	time to act	(3:1-4:6)	28		
	the problem of a "second				
	one"	(4:7-16)	10		
	one can lose all that one				
	accumulates	(4:17-6:9)	29		
	II. Qoheleth's Conclusions	(6:10-11:6)			
	Introduction (6:10-12): man does not know what				
216	God has done, for man cannot find out what is				
	good and he cannot find out what comes after.			3	
	A. Man cannot find out what is good for him to do				
	Critique of traditional wisdom				
	on the day of prosperity				
	and adversity	(7:1-14)	14		
	on justice and wickedness	(7:15-24)	10	46	
	on women and folly	(7:25-29)	5		
	on the wise man and the king	(8:1-17)	17	93	
	B. Man does not know what will come after him				111
	Man does not know his time	(9:1-12)	12		
	Man does not know what will be	(9:13-10:15)	21		
	He does not know what evil				
	will come	(10:16-11:2)	7	44	
	He does not know what good				
	will come	(11:3-6)	4		
	Poem on Youth and Old Age (11:7-12:8)			12	18
	Epilogue (12:9-14)			6	

Wright (1983:42-3) has such confidence in his methodology that he concludes his third article:

The discovery of the rationale behind the smaller numbers of the book and the discovery of their use in the systematic fashion as well confirm *beyond doubt* that the sub-sections of the book proposed in Table 1 [reproduced above] are, indeed, the divisions that the author intended. There are in all three quite independent sets of indices of structure which converge in the book: the repetitions of ending formulae described in our 1968 article, the numerical patterns built on *hebel* = 37 described in our 1980 article, and the systematic use of numbers obtained from additive series described above. Can one any longer seriously propose that dividing the book on the basis of the repetitional ending formulae is wrong? If one still insists that it is wrong, one is also going to have to say that the two quite independent numerical patterns contained in the verse-count of the units so obtained is the result of pure chance and coincidence. The odds of that being pure chance must be an astronomical figure, and the judgment that all this is chance would seem to have a credibility rating approaching zero. [Our emphasis]



This passage is quoted at length because Wright's article has had a major impact on recent studies of Qohelet. Whether or not they accept the basis of his arguments, most major studies of the book now take them into account<sup>10</sup>. Certainly consideration should be given to the evidence Wright amasses in support of his argument, but, particularly in a book which displays a tremendous variety of literary techniques including abundant repetition and chiasmic structuring (some of which we will examine below) great care ought to be exercised not to twist the evidence to fit one's own scheme. Such is the case in Wright's articles where even the basic proposition about 'repetitional ending formulae' upon which the whole structure is built uses ending formulae (consisting of phrases that are common in the book whether they occur at the end of a section or not) which do not occur at the end of the sections they are supposed to demarcate. This is the case in both of the 'introductions' (1:12-15 and 1:16-18); and the section 'on women and folly' (7:25-29). But more critical is the fact that however useful a formal approach to the text may be (and Wright has selected only a few of many formal aspects of the text that could be used in delineating its structure on which to develop his theory), it is

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<sup>10</sup>Wright himself points out in his second article the varied response his initial article engendered (1980:39-43). Perhaps among the most noteworthy responses is that of Murphy, who in 1958 wrote

'No one will ever succeed in giving a satisfactory outline of the contents of the book. Any schematic outline superimposes upon the meditation of Coheleth a framework that he certainly never had in mind', but in 1988 he seems to have done a complete about turn: he writes in his commentary on Qohelet, 'the analysis here will adopt the outline proposed by A. Wright, with only slight differences' (1988:128; cf Murphy, 1992:xxxix), because

These and other numerical patterns indicated by Wright can hardly be dismissed as coincidental, and thus they form a strong argument for a structure that goes beyond content and thought divisions (1988:128).

Caneday contends that 'Though one may not agree with all the details of Wright's analysis, there are grammatical indicators which suggest his general divisions' (1986:34), and Brown's article specifically 'provides further evidence to corroborate Wright's basic thesis and outline of the book' (1990:196). However, Schoors comments, 'Ce plan séduisant appelle dépendant quelques remarques critiques. On constate d'abord que les formules finales ne sont pas toujours très nettes: elles sont formulées de manière différente et ne se trouvent pas toujours exactement à la fin de la péricope...' (1982:97); Kidner warns that 'with a writer so fond of using repetitions and catch-phrases it is all too easy to find matching expressions to construe as "inclusions" or section-markers; and under this rigid scheme the book appears to lose something of its vitality and range' (1985:109); Ogden maintains that 'the theory is built upon such an arbitrary use of evidence that one cannot take it seriously' (1987:12); Crenshaw argues that 'in the long run even such clever analyses as Wright's numerology must stoop to manipulation in order to make the results correspond to the theory' (1988:47); Michel suggests that 'Der Leser starrt auf die Ergebnisse von WRIGHT wie ein ungläubiger Zuschauer auf das Kaninchen, das ein Zauberer gerade aus seinem Zylinder geholt hat' (1988:38), and 'So dürfte es höchst fraglich sein, daß die Ergebnisse von WRIGHT, wenn sie stimmen sollten, wirklich eine von *Qohelet selbst* beabsichtigte Gliederung zutage gefördert haben' (1988:39); Whybray contends that 'his analysis falls victim to the same kind of subjectivism as ... others: his formal patterns do not in fact convincingly correspond to the themes which he proposes as thematically characteristic of the various sections into which he has divided the book' (1989b:43); and Fox notes, 'Wright claims to have solved the Riddle of the Sphinx. But perhaps there is no riddle, no hidden structural code to be "cracked". The book does not progress in an organized fashion from start to finish but rather wanders about, finally leading back (in 12:8) to the starting point' (1989:157).

of little use if it does not reflect the sequence of ideas: Wright's division of Qohelet hides rather than elucidates the tremendous inter-weaving of themes which occurs throughout the book. This comes across clearly in the introduction to Wright's first article where he claims (1968:313-4),

When these patterns are taken as indicating the framework of the book and when that framework is brought to the material as an overlay as it were, there emerges out of the apparent disorder a straightforward presentation of a very simple theme, albeit somewhat reduced in content from what has previously been seen as the message.

While the book may divide between the first 111 verses and the second 111 verses, and certainly the *masora parva* at 6:10 indicates the halfway point, there is no clear break between 'Qoheleth's Investigation of Life' in the first half and 'Qoheleth's Conclusions' in the second: investigation certainly continues into the second half, and conclusions are expressed in the first. While chs.7,8 do tackle the theme 'man cannot find out what is good for him to do', they address a much wider range of issues, and this topic is not confined to these two chapters - and the same applies to 'man does not know what will come after him' in chs.9,10 and the first half of ch.11. Moreover, the uneven division between, for example, the short section on the 'study of pleasure seeking' in 2:1-11 (which may effectively summarise the passage) and 'one can lose all that one accumulates' in 4:17-6:9 (which certainly does not) is decidedly unhelpful so far as delineating the *thematic* structure of the book is concerned.

Wright has nothing new to add to the debate about contradictions in Qohelet. The structure he claims to perceive does nothing to explain the obvious tensions in the book, and they are passed over in one sentence (1983:39) thus:

most of the 'orthodox' lines in the book, which stand in some tension with other lines and have, therefore, led commentators to appeal to multiple authorship, are not in tension at all, if one *simply* reads the lines as quotations from traditional wisdom which Qoheleth rejects, qualifies, or agrees with only partially. [Our emphasis]

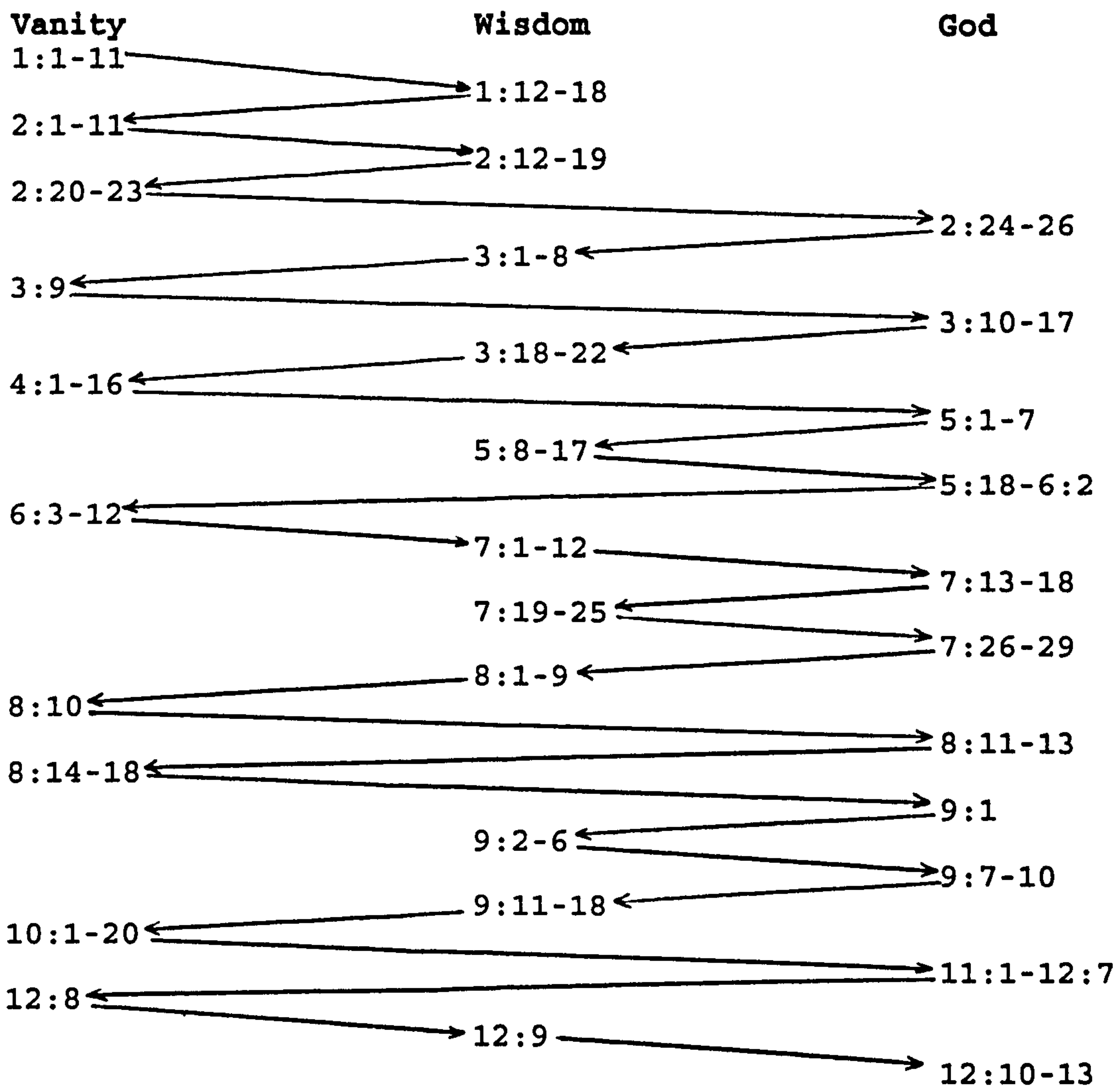
No justification is offered for this position, and no attempt made to explain how the reader is to discern what is quoted material and what is original when there is no marking of quoted material. Indeed, due to the diverse views expressed in Qohelet, it would be possible, by adopting this method, to present a case for quite opposite interpretations depending on which parts were considered as 'original' and which as 'quoted'. As Fox points out in his excursus on 'Approaches to the Contradictions in Qohelet' (1989:19-28),



The quotation hypothesis, as it has been used throughout the history of Qohelet-exegesis, too quickly becomes a magic wand for the easy - and illusive - elimination of difficulties, making significant complexities disappear in the process (1989:26).

### 2.1.5 Ellul's woven texture

Ellul, by sharp contrast to Wright, admits, (1990:34) 'I have now become thoroughly convinced that Qohelet follows no logical coherent plan, nor does he treat a different question in each part'. He claims, rather, to 'find a deliberate dispersal of some twenty central themes,' such that 'Throughout the book the thoughts relate to each other from within variegated sections' (1990:35). However, while Ellul would doubtless deny that he undertakes to delineate the structure of Qohelet, this is precisely what he does when he describes in the book 'a kind of woven texture rather than a logical plan,' which has 'a texture ... like that of a complex variegated piece of cloth' (1990:36). Three particular themes stand out (1990:38):



The two themes of ‘vanity’ and ‘wisdom’ dominate from the outset, and, ‘They contradict each other’ (1990:36):

Wisdom is subjected to vanity, true! But wisdom also constitutes our only weapon against vanity. We witness a kind of debate between wisdom and vanity. On the one hand, wisdom demonstrates the vanity of everything, but is itself vanity. On the other hand, vanity loses its sharpness and bitterness, since the wise person has passed beyond all vanity (1990:36).

The theme of God, however, is also central, but ‘at the same time present[s] us with an additional contradiction’ (1990:37). Indeed, for Ellul the contradictions are an essential element, if not *the* essential element, in the book, which ‘guide us to a point where we must recognize the true character of human existence, and not just its reality: human existence is essentially self-contradictory’ (1990:39). This suggests a close parallel with our thesis: ambiguity is an essential element of Qohelet precisely because human experience presents so many ambiguities.

2.1.6 De Jong’s observation and instruction complexes

De Jong provides our final example of an attempt to find a definitive structure to the book of Qohelet. He claims (1992:114) that ‘Structuring by means of a distinction between observation and instruction parts and by means of association and opposition determines the character of the book’. On this basis he proposes this structure for the book (1992:108):

1.1	introduction	
1.2	motto	
1.3-4.16		observation complex
4.17-5.8		instruction complex
5.9-6.9		observation complex
6.10-7.22		instruction complex
7.23-29		observation complex
8.1-8		instruction complex
8.9-9.12		observation complex
9.13-12.7		instruction complex
12.8	motto	
12.9-14	epilogue	

He acknowledges that these sections are not so clear-cut as the diagram suggests because the borders between sections are not distinct and instruction is found in observation complexes and observation in instruction complexes. But, ‘What matters ... is the density of these types of texts’ (1992:108), and de Jong amasses stylistic and semantic evidence to support the divisions he proposes. On this basis he argues that ‘the content of the book oscillates between observa-



tion and instruction,' and 'this structure offers a meaningful division of the content of Qohelet ... [because] it offers a better grip on the content of the book' (1992:112). He notes that the use of the first person predominates in the observation complexes, while advice and admonitions are concentrated in the instruction complexes (1992:109). The word *hebel* appears most often in the observation complexes where it is used almost exclusively in conclusions (1992:109-10); and similarly the enjoyment texts<sup>11</sup> are found in these sections, which casts them in a particular light - that is to say, they are not a *call* to enjoyment at all, but an observation that it is good to enjoy life if one has the opportunity to do so (1992:110-11). However, de Jong sees 'human labour' as the central theme in the observation complexes, and, he says, 'The conclusion is obvious: human labour is in vain (*hebel*). This central insight summarizes Qohelet's observations concerning labour' (1992:113). The instruction complexes, in which Qohelet advocates 'a wisdom of caution' (1992:113), form the response to this observation.

## 2.2 Determinate schemata and different structures

These six commentators provide six very different proposals for the overall structure of Qohelet, each purporting to be solidly founded on 'determinate schemata' (e.g., Loader's 'polar structures'; Lohfink's 'palindrome'; Rousseau's 'cycles'; Wright's 'numerical patterns'; Ellul's 'woven texture'; and de Jong's 'observation and instruction complexes') which the writers find in the text itself, and which, presumably, are accessible to any competent reader. Moreover, these six are by no means exhaustive - many other examples could have been given of proposed structure, or lack of structure, in the book (see note 4).

Kidner (1985:109) is right to warn that 'with a writer so fond of using repetitions and catchphrases it is all too easy to find matching expressions to construe as "inclusions" or section-markers.' To illustrate how readily the text of Qohelet lends itself to different structures according to which aspects of the text are considered and what is centralised, we will present in the next chapter a chiasmic pattern which is not intended to be definitive (though we

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<sup>11</sup>De Jong lists 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 8:15 and 9:7-10 as the enjoyment texts. This is a very important thread which runs through the book. It will be considered in more detail below.

believe the evidence for it is *at least* as good as the evidence for Wright's structure), but rather will show how a convincing argument can be raised, using formal and thematic indices *within the text itself*, to indicate a structure which cuts across the divisions proposed particularly by Wright<sup>12</sup>, but also those suggested by Loader, Lohfink, Rousseau, Ellul and de Jong.

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<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., Wright's claims that 'it is generally acknowledged that the book gets underway in 1,12' (1968:320); 'What in turn is clear from the 93/93 pattern is that there is also a break in the book at 2:1 and 11:6' (1980:47), and 'It is clear from the way in which the groups of series are distributed that 2:1-6:9, 7:1-8:17, and 9:1-11:6 are each distinct and integral sections for the author' (1983:37).



### CHAPTER 3, A Proposal for the Structure of 1:4-2:26

<b><u>SECTION A</u></b>		101 words
Part I	'repetition in nature' (1:4-8a)	54 words
overlap	(1:8a)	
Part II	'repetition in the human realm' (1:8-11)	54 words
inclusio: 'generations/ages come and go'		
 <b><u>SECTION B</u></b>		 138 words
Author's self-introduction (1:12)		
Part I	'what is done under the sun/under heaven' (1:13-15)	
	ונתתי	
	ראיתי	
Part II	Centre - 'wisdom & knowledge' (1:16-18)	
	דברתי	
	ואתנה	
Part III	'pleasure' (2:1-3)	
	אמרתי	
	תרתי	
inclusio: 'search by wisdom of what is done under heaven'		
 <b><u>SECTION C - CENTRE: the height of human achievement (2:4-10)</u></b>		 94 words
 <b><u>SECTION B'</u></b>		 138 words
Chiasmus: theme 'wisdom & folly'		
	ופניתי (2:11)	
	ופניתי (2:12)	
	לראות (2:12)	
	וראות (2:13-14a)	
	ידעתי Centre - 'wise & foolish die alike' (2:14b)	
	ואמרתי (2:15a)	
	ודברתי (2:15b-16)	
	ושנאתי (2:17)	
	ושנאתי (2:18-19)	
inclusio: 'the work at which one works under the sun', and הכל הבל ורעות רוח		
 <b><u>SECTION A'</u></b>		 101 words
Introduction: 'despair over work under the sun' (2:20)		+2
Part I	'futility of work for selfish ends' (2:21-23)	45 words
Part II	'goodness of God's gifts' (2:24-26)	45 +2 words
inclusio: 'wisdom & knowledge'		

### 3.1 Defence of the proposed structure

Our proposal assumes that 1:1-3 is an introductory passage which announces the author (or, more likely, the supposed author) and some of the major themes of the book<sup>1</sup>:

<sup>1</sup>A number of commentators also take these verses as introductory: see especially Rousseau (1981:201,213), for whom it is essential to his theory of the structure of 1:4-11 and also of the whole book that these are introductory verses. See also, e.g., Lohfink (1979:267-268); Ogden (1987:27-30); Crenshaw (1988:48,55-61); Whybray (1989:30,34-38); Brown (1990:197). Others regard v.3 as part of the poem from 1:3-11: see, e.g., Schoors (1982b:99,115); Caneday (1986:34); Murphy (1988:128). Others take v.2 along with this section - e.g., Barton

- v.1 Superscription introducing Qohelet, the supposed author
- v.2 'Motto' introducing the key word **הבל**
- v.3 Key question arising from v.2 introducing key words and phrases - **יתרון**, **עמל** and **תחת השמש**

The structure of the rest of the first two chapters may then be represented thus:

A	1:4-11	
B		1:12-2:3
C		2:4-10
B'	2:11-19	
A'	2:20-26	

Although A' and B' are each one verse shorter than A and B, the balance of this structure becomes apparent when the number of words in each section is taken into account (remembering that the versification was imposed on the text by the Masoretes<sup>2</sup>, so may *not* be an accurate guide to the original structure. Wright's theory is dependent on verse divisions<sup>3</sup>):

A	1:4-11 (101 words)
B	1:12-2:3 (138 words)
C	2:4-10 (94 words)
B'	2:11-19 (138 words)
A'	2:20-26 (103 words)

The structure gains further support from the distribution of first and third person verbs: in sections A and A' third person verbs predominate, while in B, C and B' there is an overabundance of first person singular verbs as well as first person singular pronominal suffixes:

A	1:4-11	primarily 3rd person (101 words)
B	1:12-2:3	primarily 1st person (138 words)
C	2:4-10	primarily 1st person (94 words)
B'	2:11-19	primarily 1st person (138 words)
A'	2:20-26	primarily 3rd person (103 words)

The distribution of first person verbs and pronominal suffixes also displays a chiasmic structure corresponding to the pattern outlined above. The number of first person verbs rises from 0 in A, to 13 in each of B<sup>4</sup>, C<sup>5</sup> and B'<sup>6</sup>, then falls to 3 in A'<sup>7</sup>. The chiasmic pattern

(1912:46,69); Loader (1979:112); Bergant (1982:231); Mulder (1982:153); Eaton (1983:50); Wright (1983:34); - and yet others regard the whole of 1:1-11 as a unit - e.g., Ellul (1990:38); Leopold (1952:25).

<sup>2</sup>This is discussed, e.g., by Würthwein in *The Text of the Old Testament*, ch.2.

<sup>3</sup>Wright argues,

The conclusion is ineluctable that the units which we call verses are original to the book, that the author and editor were counting them and constructing the text on numerical patterns and that Qoheleth announced his patterns in the inclusion in 1:2 and 12:8 (1980:47).

<sup>4</sup>הייתי (1:12), נתתי (13), ראיתי (14), דברתי (16), הגדלתי (16), הוספתי (16), אתנה (17), ידעתי (17), אמרתי (2:1), אנסכה (1), אמרתי (2), תרתי (3), אראה (3).

<sup>5</sup>גדלתי (2:4), בניתי (4), נטעתי (4), עשיתי (5), נטעתי (5), עשיתי (6), קניתי (7), כנסתי (8), עשיתי (8), גרלתי (9), הוספתי (9), אצלתי (10), מנעתי (10).

<sup>6</sup>פניתי (11), עמלתי (1), פניתי (12), ראיתי (13), ידעתי (14), אמרתי (15), חכמתי (15), דברתי (15), שנאתי (17), חכמתי (19), עמלתי (19), אניחנו (18), שנאתי (18).

<sup>7</sup>סבותי (2:20), עמלתי (20), ראיתי (24).



becomes clear when the percentage is measured of first person verbs in the total number of words in each section:

A	1:4-11	0.0% first person verbs
B	1:12-2:3	9.4% first person verbs
C	2:4-10	13.8% first person verbs
B'	2:11-19	9.4% first person verbs
A'	2:20-26	2.9% first person verbs

The results are even more dramatic when we look at the number of first person suffixes. The number of first person suffixes rises from 0 in A, to 9 in B<sup>8</sup>, and 19 in C<sup>9</sup>, before dropping back to 9<sup>10</sup> in B', and to 2 in A'<sup>11</sup>:

A	1:4-11	0.0% first person suffixes
B	1:12-2:3	6.5% first person suffixes
C	2:4-10	20.2% first person suffixes
B'	2:11-19	6.5% first person verbs
A'	2:20-26	1.9% first person suffixes

The pattern of third person verbs and suffixes, also offers support to the theory<sup>12</sup>:

A	1:4-11	19 third person verbs and suffixes <sup>13</sup>
B	1:12-2:3	12 third person verbs and suffixes <sup>14</sup>
C	2:4-10	10 third person verbs and suffixes <sup>15</sup>
B'	2:11-19	16 third person verbs and suffixes <sup>16</sup>
A'	2:20-26	23 third person verbs and suffixes <sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup>לבי (1:13,16,16,17; 2:1,3,3), לפני (1:16), בשרי (2:3).

<sup>9</sup>(10) חלקי, (10,10) עמלי, (10,10) לבי, (10) עיני, (9) חכמתי, (7,9) לפני, (4,4,5,6,7,7,8,8,9), לי (2:4) מעשי.

<sup>10</sup>(18) אחרי, (18,19) עמלי, (17) עלי, (15) יקרני, (15,15) לבי, (11) ידי, (2:11) מעשי.

<sup>11</sup>לבי (2:20), ממני (25).

<sup>12</sup>Of course, if the frequency of occurrences of third person verbs is measured rather than the actual number, it is actually higher in C (10.6%) than in B (8.7%), though still lower than B' (11.6%) and markedly lower than A (18.8%) and A' (22.3%).

<sup>13</sup>Verbs: (10) יהיה, (9) יעשה, (9) נעשה, (9) יהיה, (9) היה, (8) תמלא, (8) תשבוע, (8) יוכל, (5) בא, (1:5) זרח.

Suffixes: (11) להם, (7) איננו, (6) סביבתי, (1:5) מקומו.

<sup>14</sup>Verbs: (18) יעשו, (18) יוסיף, (16) ראה, (16) היה, (15) יוכל, (15) יוכל, (14) נעשו, (13) נתן, (1:13) נעשה.

Suffixes: (2:3) חייהם, (1:13) בו.

<sup>15</sup>Verbs: (10) שאלו, (9) עמדה, (7) היו, (2:7,7,9,10) היה.

Suffixes: (10) מהם, (6) מהם, (2:5) בהם.

<sup>16</sup>Verbs: (18) יהיה, (17) נעשה, (16) ימות, (16) נשכח, (15) יקרני, (14) יקרה, (12) עשוהו, (12) יבוא, (2:11) עשו.

Suffixes: (18) אניחנו, (14) כלם, (14) בראשו, (14) עיניו, (2:12) עשוהו.

<sup>17</sup>Verbs: (25) יהוש, (25) יאכל, (24) הראה, (24) שתה, (24) יאכל, (23) שכב, (21) יתננו, (21) עמל, (2:21) עמלו.

Suffixes: (23) לבו, (23) ענינו, (23) ימיו, (22) לבו, (22) עמלו, (21) חלקו, (21) יתננו, (21) בו, (2:21) עמלו, (24) עמלו, (26) לפניו.

This is enhanced if we consider all non-first-person-singular verbs and suffixes. In this case we should add one imperative verb and one first person plural suffix to A<sup>18</sup>, and two imperatives and one second person suffix to B<sup>19</sup>:

A	1:4-11	21 non-first person singular verbs and suffixes
B	1:12-2:3	15 non-first person singular verbs and suffixes <sup>20</sup>
C	2:4-10	10 non-first person singular verbs and suffixes
B'	2:11-19	16 non-1st person singular verbs and suffixes <sup>32</sup>
A'	2:20-26	23 non-first person singular verbs and suffixes

The distribution of perfect verbs displays a similar chiasmic pattern to the one shown above. 6 perfect verbs are used in A<sup>21</sup>, 15 in B<sup>22</sup>, 20 in C<sup>23</sup>, 16 in B'<sup>24</sup>, and 10 in A'<sup>25</sup>:

A	1:4-11	6 perfect verbs
B	1:12-2:3	15 perfect verbs <sup>32</sup>
C	2:4-10	20 perfect verbs
B'	2:11-19	16 perfect verbs <sup>32</sup>
A'	2:20-26	10 perfect verbs

Although the use of imperfect verbs does not show the reverse pattern for the whole of the two chapters, it does do so very effectively for the three middle sections:

A	1:4-11	9 imperfect verbs <sup>26</sup>
B	1:12-2:3	8 imperfect verbs <sup>27</sup>
C	2:4-10	0 imperfect verbs
B'	2:11-19	8 imperfect verbs <sup>28</sup>
A'	2:20-26	3 imperfect verbs <sup>29</sup>

It is a feature of all these comparisons, seen clearly in the graphs on the next page, that the final section, A', to a greater or lesser extent disrupts the pattern. This is an important observation, to which we shall return.

<sup>18</sup> מלפננו and ראה (both 1:10).

<sup>19</sup> לכה, ראה, and אנסכה (all 2:1).

<sup>20</sup> These numbers raise the question whether an extra non-first-person-singular perfect verb has been added to B', or one omitted from B. Or is this, perhaps, seeking too neat a pattern! On the other hand, the distribution of non-first-person-singular verbs and suffixes shows a decrease of 6, followed by a decrease of 5, followed by an increase of 6 followed by an increase of 7 - which gives a very neat pattern. The same, however, cannot be maintained for the distribution of perfect verbs.

<sup>21</sup> נעשה (9), היה (9,10,10), בא (5), זרח (1:5).

<sup>22</sup> היה (16), הוּסַפְתִּי (16), הגדלתי (16), דברתי (14), נעשו (14), ראיתי (13), נתן (13), נעשה (13), נתתי (1:12), הייתי (16), תרתי (3), אמרתי (2:1,2), ידעתי (17), ראה (16).

<sup>23</sup> כנסתי (8), היו (7), היה (7,7,9,10), קניתי (5), נסעתי (5,6,8), עשיתי (4), נסעתי (4), בניתי (2:4), הגדלתי (10), מנעתי (10), אצלתי (10), שאלו (9), עמדה (9), הוּסַפְתִּי (9), גדלתי (9).

<sup>24</sup> חכמתי (15), אמרתי (14), ידעתי (13), ראיתי (12), עשוהו (11), עמלתי (11), עשו (2:11), פניתי (15), דברתי (15), חכמתי (19), עמלתי (18), שנאתי (17), נעשה (17), שנאתי (16), נשכח (15), רברתי (19).

<sup>25</sup> נתן (26,26), ראיתי (24), הראה (24), שתה (23), שכב (21), עמל (21), עמלו (20), עמלתי (2:11), סבותי (15).

<sup>26</sup> יהיה (11,11), יהיו (10), יאמר (9), יעשה (9), יהיה (8), תמלא (8), תשבוע (1:8), יוכלתי (11).

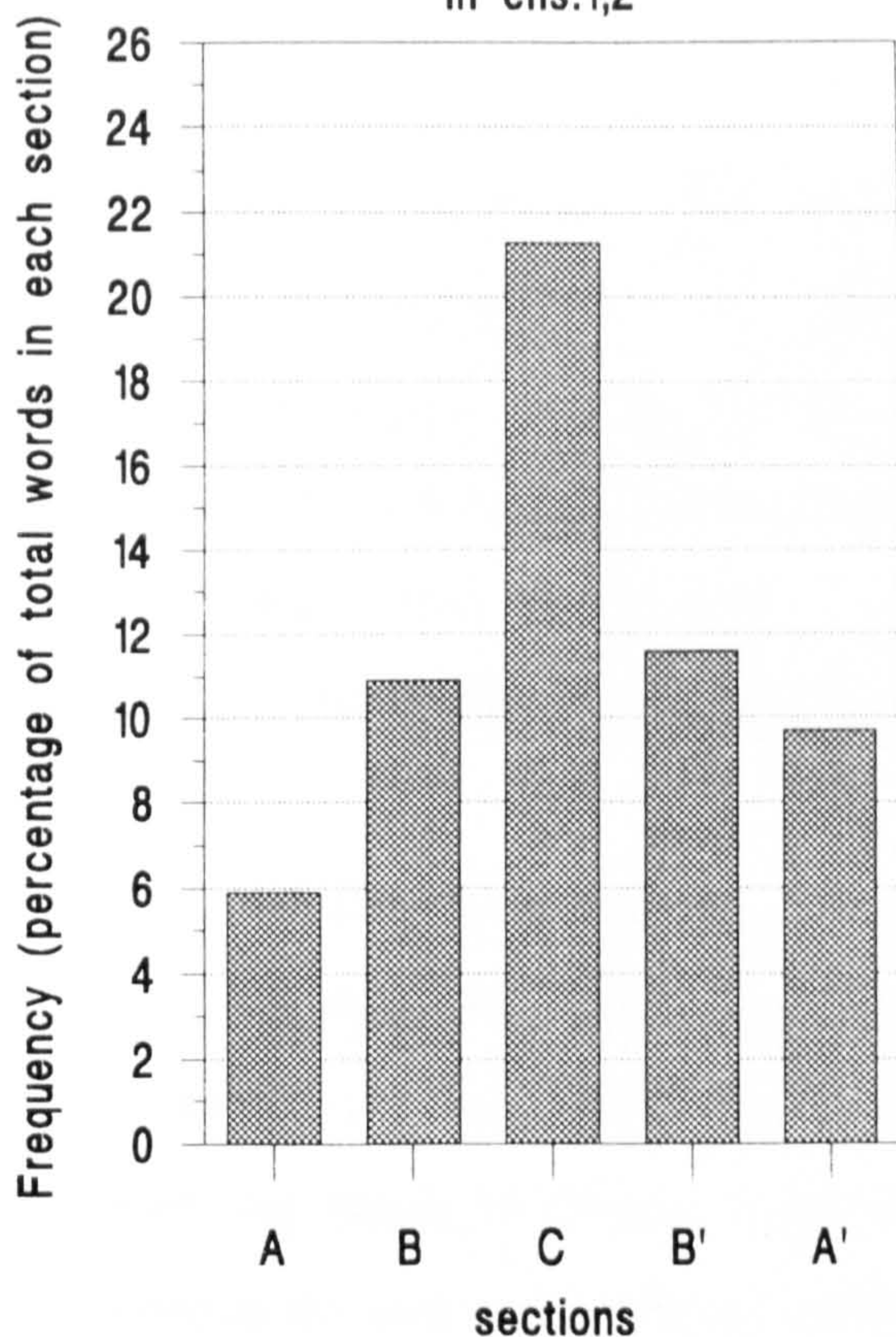
<sup>27</sup> יעשו (3), אראה (2:1), אנסכה (18,18), יוסיף (17), אתנה (1:15,15), יוכלתי (3).

<sup>28</sup> ישלט (18,19), יהיה (18), אניחנו (16), ימות (15), יקרני (14), יקרה (2:12), יבוא (19).

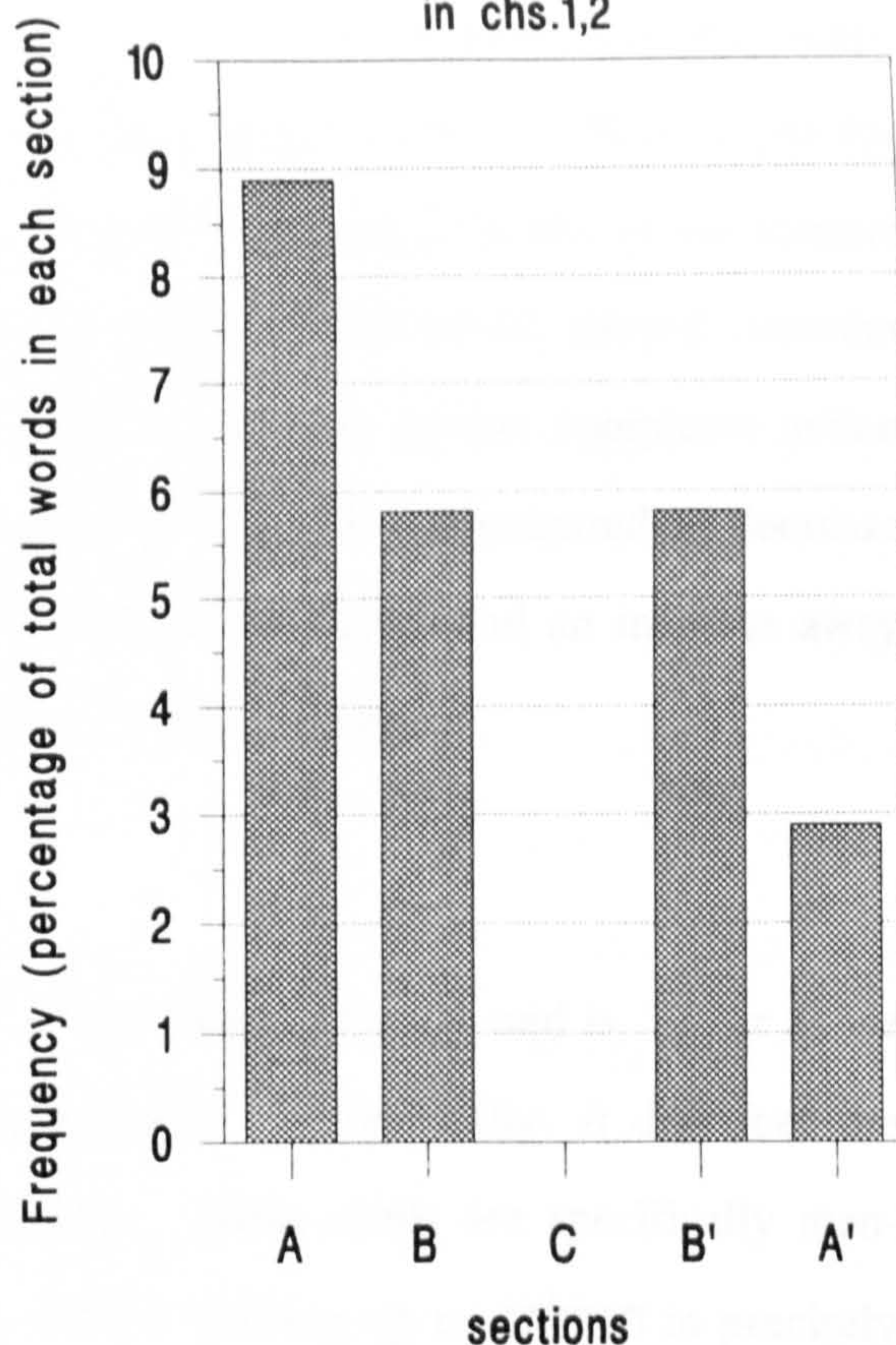
<sup>29</sup> יחוש (24,25), יאכל (2:21), יתנונו (25).



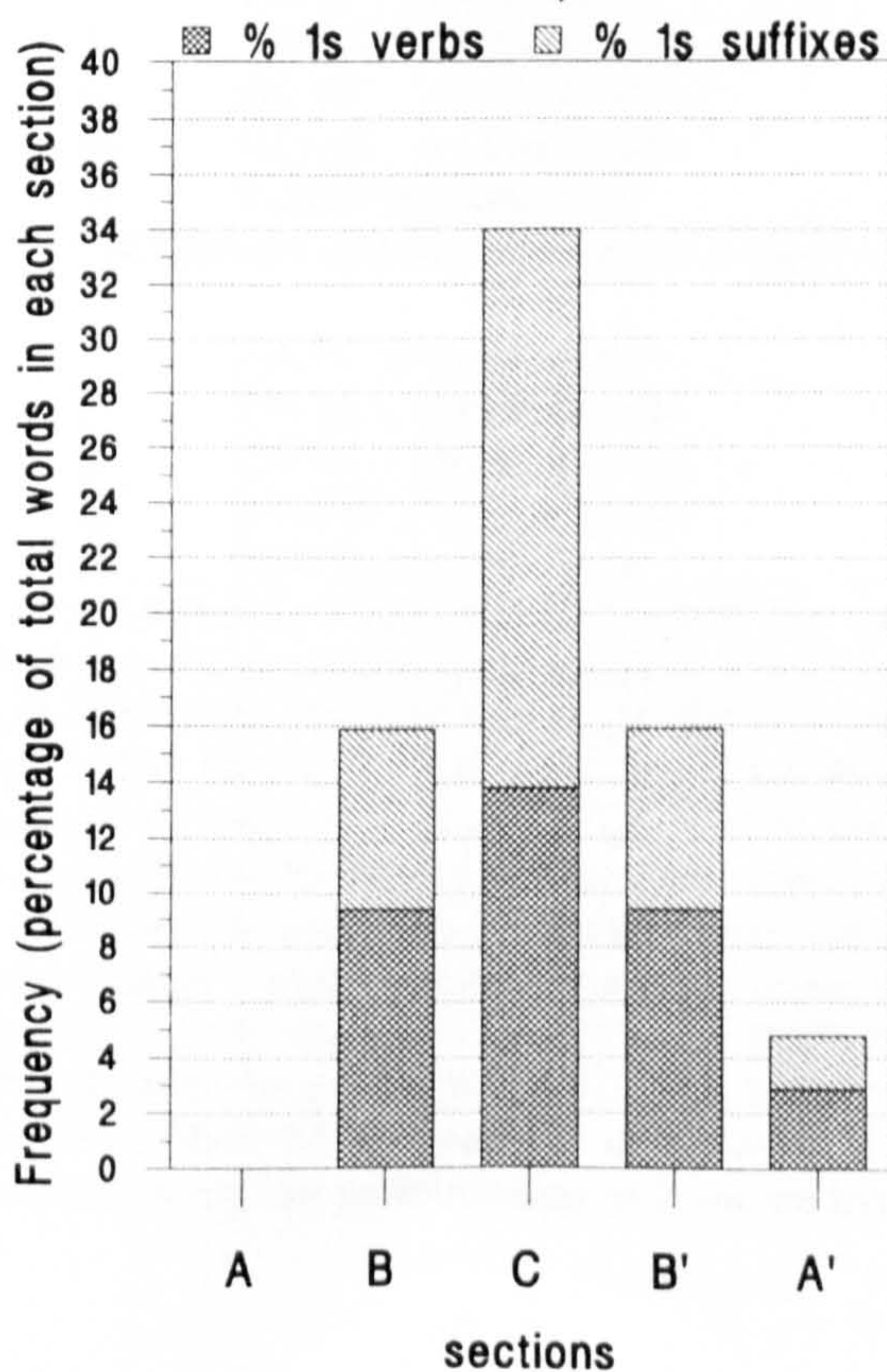
Distribution of Perfect Verbs  
in chs.1,2



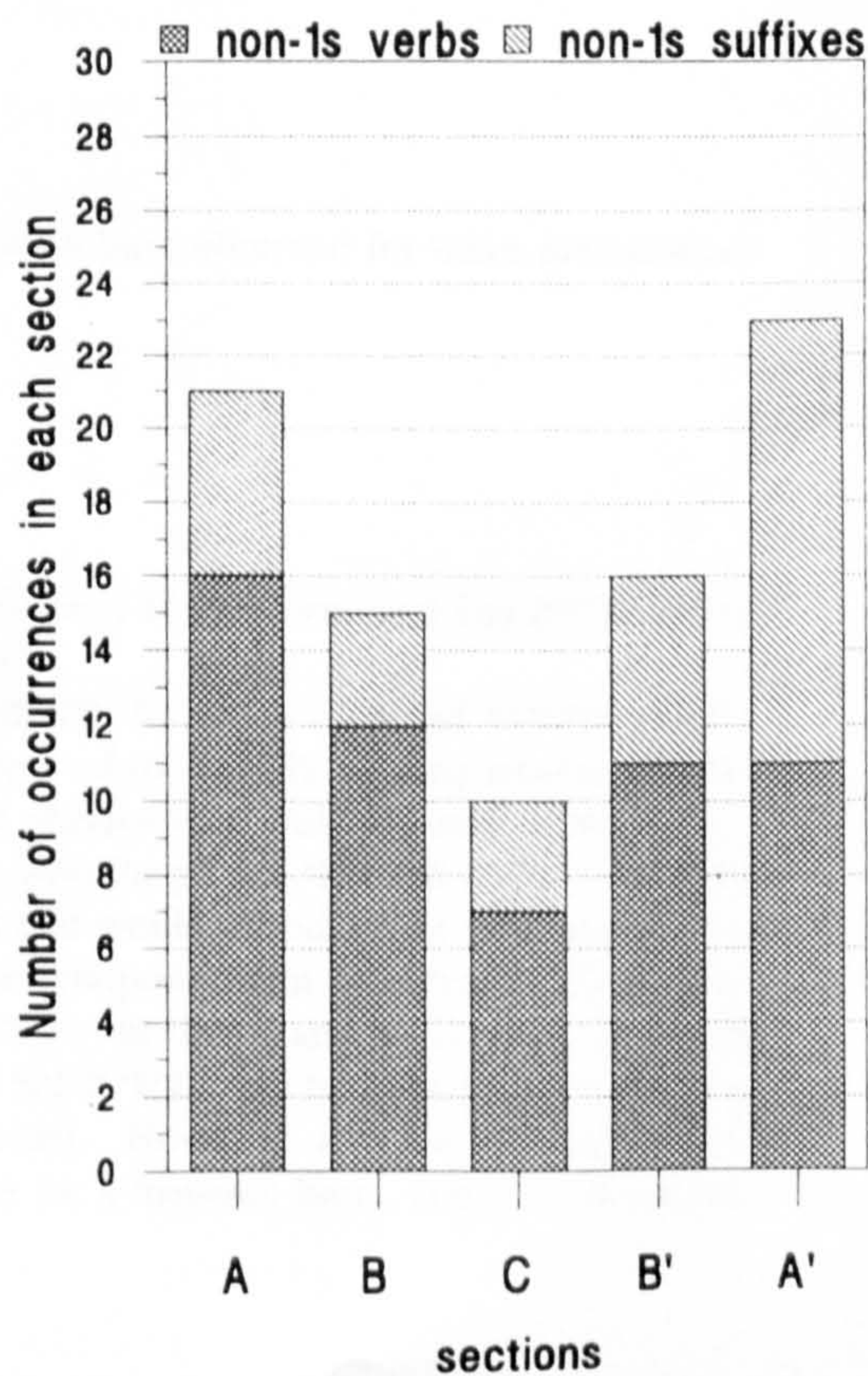
Distribution of Imperfect Verbs  
in chs.1,2



Frequency of First Person  
Singular Verbs and Suffixes in  
chs.1,2



Number of Non-First-Person-Singular  
Perfect and Imperfect Verbs and Suffixes  
in Each Section of chs.1,2





These graphs show clearly the chiasmic structure which these statistics suggest, with the exception of the imperfect verbs in A'<sup>30</sup>. The chiasmus is most clearly shown in these graphs for the middle three sections, which corresponds with the perfect balance in terms of the number of words in these sections, and this helps to define the central section which we will consider next. The graphs give the clear impression of an increase in first person completed action towards the centre and a decrease away from the centre, along with a corresponding decrease in non-first person incomplete or continuing action towards the centre and an increase away from it. This correlates with the thematic development in these sections.

### 3.1.1 2:4-10, the centre

The central part of this chiasmus is the key to the whole structure and is, so far as we are aware, a division which has not previously been noted. Thematically, it describes the deeds undertaken by Qohelet in his search for pleasure. These deeds are specifically mentioned at the start of 2:4 where Qohelet says הגדלתי מעשי (picking up on הגדלתי in precisely the same form in 1:16), and the rest of the section up to the next occurrence of the verb גדל<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>The importance of plural nouns is discussed below. If the technically plural nouns לפני and אלהים and the dual nouns are included, the distribution is thus:

A	1:4-11	5 plural nouns
B	1:12-2:3	10 plural nouns
C	2:4-10	19 plural nouns
B'	2:11-19	6 plural nouns
A'	2:20-26	6 plural nouns

However, if these are removed, the pattern is more consistent with what we have observed for other grammatical forms:

A	1:4-11	4 plural nouns
B	1:12-2:3	8 plural nouns
C	2:4-10	16 plural nouns
B'	2:11-19	4 plural nouns
A'	2:20-26	2 plural nouns

The reverse pattern is observed in B, C and B' for singular nouns, particularly if כל is removed and אלהים added in which case there are 42 singular nouns in each of B and B' and 17 in C.

<sup>31</sup>וגדלתי והוספתי חכמה על כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ורעת in 1:16 and וגדלתי והוספתי חכמה על כל-אשר-היה לפני בירושלם אף חכמתי עמדה לי in 2:9 illustrate well the danger of too readily treating similar phrases as inclusios for sections of this book where there are so many repeated phrases that could be used in this way. These two very similar verses could be taken as the inclusio to a section with the phrase אשר-אראה אי-זה טוב לבני אשר-אעש precisely at the centre (76 words either side). The first half would introduce the task, the second describe Qohelet's deeds as part of that task. However, exactly the same purpose might be served if the equally similar verses 1:14, ופניתי אני בכל-, ראיתי את-כל-המעשים שנעשו תחת השמש והנה הכל הבל ורעות תוח, and 2:11, מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש, are taken as the inclusio of a passage with הגדלתי מעשי precisely at the centre (110 words either side). However, it is our contention that these divisions are not so convincing as those we have suggested either on a thematic basis, nor on a linguistic basis.



in v.9 catalogues these deeds using a series of first person verbs: עשיתי (vv.5,6,8)<sup>32</sup>, בניתי (v.4), נטעתי (vv.4,5), קניתי (v.7), כנסתי (v.8), גדלתי (v.9) and הוספתי (v.9), and the negatives לא אצלתי and לא-מנעתי (v.10). These are all verbs portraying increase and abundance, and this theme is continued by such words as מקרה (v.7), הרבה (v.7), סגלת (v.8) and תענוגת (v.8), and the repeated use of כל (vv.5,7,9,10,10,10,10). The abundance is also emphasised by the great number of plural nouns used in this passage: מעשי, בתים and כרמים in v.4; גנות and פרדסים in v.5; ברכות and עצים in v.6; עבדים, שפחות and בני-בית in v.7; and מלכים in v.7; and שרים, שדות, תענוגת and שדות in v.8. Indeed, the description is of superlative abundance because it is twice stated that the increase is greater than any previously experienced in Jerusalem (v.7,9). Perhaps this is intended as an initial response to the question in 1:3, מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש, particularly in view of the repeated use of כל-עמלי in 2:10.

The catalogue of deeds can be divided into two halves, thus:

הגדלתי מעשי			(intro.)
בתי	לי	בניתי	
כרמים	לי	נטעתי	
גנות ופרדסים ונטעתי בהם עץ כל-פרי	לי	עשיתי	
ברכות מים להשקות מהם יער צומח עצים	לי	עשיתי	
עבדים ושפחות ובני-בית			(centre)
גם מקנה בקר וצאן	לי	היה	
מכל שהיו לפני בירושלם	לי	היה	הרבה
גם כסף וזהב וסגלת מלכים והמדינות	לי	כנסתי	
שרים ושרות ותענוגת בני האדם שדה ושדות	לי	עשיתי	
וגדלתי והוספתי מכל שהיה לפני בירושלם אף חכמתי עמדה לי			(conc.)

The item in the list where the first person verb is not followed by לי (for no obvious reason, although it is included in some manuscripts) marks the centre<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, there is a further change at this point: in the first half when the masculine and feminine plurals both occur, the feminine always precedes the masculine. This is reversed in the second half. The three lines beginning with עשיתי show this most clearly because they are otherwise very well balanced:

<sup>32</sup>It is notable that there are three third person verbs from the root עשה in each of B and B' with no first person verbs from this root, while in C there are three first person verbs from עשה with no third person verbs from the root.

<sup>33</sup>It is noteworthy that while the item at the centre of the list omits לי, as also does the introduction, in the conclusion it is delayed to the very end of the verse. This serves to place even greater emphasis on a word to which attention is already drawn by its use eight times previously in the passage.

עשיתי לי	גנות	ופרדסים ונטעתי בהם	עץ	כל-	פרי
עשיתי לי	ברכות	מים להשקות מהם	יער	צומח	עצים
עשיתי לי	שרים	ושרות	האדם	שדה	ושדות
		ותענוגת בני			

The second half of v.8, however, should be noted: it contains three plurals which start with a feminine plural followed by a masculine plural which in turn is followed by a second feminine plural<sup>34</sup>. Perhaps this indicates the end of the list.

The two halves also illustrate in different ways the increase which they describe. The first four items fall into two balanced pairs, but the second in each pair is one letter longer:

בניתי לי בתים  
נטעתי לי כרמים

עשיתי לי גנות ופרדסים ונטעתי בהם עץ כל-פרי  
עשיתי לי ברכות מים להשקות מהם יער צומח עצים

In the second half the items in the list, and the conclusion as well, also increase in terms of letters:

היה לי גם מקנה בקר וצאן  
הרבה היה לי מכל שהיו לפני בירושלם  
כנסתי לי גם כסף וזהב וסגלת מלכים והמדינות  
עשיתי לי שרים ושרות ותענוגת בני האדם שדה ושדות  
וגדלתי והוספתי מכל שהיה לפני בירושלם אף חכמתי עמדה לי

Moreover, they increase by one word - including the item at the centre of the list:

קניתי	עבדים	ושפחות ובני-	בית							5
היה	לי	מקנה	בקר	וצאן						6
הרבה	היה	לי	מכל	לפני	בירושלם					7
כנסתי	לי	גם	כסף	וזהב	וסגלת	מלכים	והמדינות			8
עשיתי	לי	שרים	ושרות	ותענוגת	בני	האדם	שדה	ושדות		9
וגדלתי	והוספתי	מכל	שהיה	לפני	בירושלם	אף	חכמתי	עמדה	לי	10

The four clauses in v.10 decrease in length in a similar fashion:

וכל	אשר	שאלו	עיני	לא	אצלתי	מהם	7
לא-	מנעתי	את-	לבי	מכל-	שמחה		6
כי-	לבי	שמח	מכל-	עמלי			5
וזה-	היה	חלקי	מכל-	עמלי			5

The emphasis in these verses is very much on the fact that this abundance is for 'me'.

The self-interest is emphasised by the use nine times of לי in the section (vv.4,4,5,6,7,7,8,9),

<sup>34</sup>In the second half of v.5 there is one actual plural, בהם. In the second half of v.6 there are two plurals, מהם and עצים - but להשקות may be designed to look like a plural. In the second half of v.8 there are three plurals. Thus increase is portrayed in yet another way. ותענוגת is especially noteworthy because it only appears as a masculine plural elsewhere (Mic 1:16; 2:9; Cant 7:7).



in addition to the other first person terms we noted above. This is an important observation because **לִי** occurs only once more in Qohelet (12:1), and is one of the features which sets this section out from those which precede and follow it. The emphasis on the first person is enhanced by the prolific use of the *yodh*, usually preceded by a *hireq* which gives the 'i' sound of the first person ending. The *yodh* occurs in every word in v.4, and twice in **בְּנִיתִי** (and also the three occurrences in this passage of **עָשִׂיתִי** and in **קִנִּיתִי**). It then appears 6 times in each of vv.5,6; 11 times in v.7; 9 times in v.8; 7 times in v.9; and 11 times in v.10. Thus 53 of the 94 words in this section contain at least one *yodh*.

While in v.4 the hiphil **הַגְדַּלְתִּי** is used to indicate that Qohelet brought about great works, by v.9 it is personal greatness that is indicated as the hiphil form is dropped from the verb **גָּדַל** (although it is retained in **וְהוֹסַפְתִּי**). Thus, following on from v.3, (s)he sets out to perform great deeds, presumably on the pretext of seeing **טוֹב לְבִנֵי הָאָדָם**, but ends up in self-congratulation because (s)he claims to be greater than any predecessor in Jerusalem. The catalogue starts with productive, creative activity, but progresses to describe things acquired purely for the pursuit of pleasure - probably concluding with sexual pleasure. The development is gradual, but after the realisation at the end of v.7 that Qohelet has more than anyone before him/her in Jerusalem, the remaining items in the list entail acquisition for hedonistic pleasure only and no acts of creativity. It is notable that the verb **עָשִׂיתִי** changes its meaning by v.8: in vv.5,6 it describes creative deeds, in v.8 it indicates acquisition and loses any difference to **קִנִּיתִי** and **כִּנְסָתִי**. Does this, perhaps, signify that the pursuit of wealth and pleasure has destroyed any creativity with which the author may have set out?

Besides the unity of theme which we demonstrated above, this section is marked out by important words which do *not* occur in these verses. Thirteen of the twenty-nine occurrences of **אֲנִי** in Qohelet are in sections B and B' (1:12,16,16; 2:1,11,12,13,14,15,15,18,18), but there are none in C. **הַבֵּל**, which is used six times in B and B' (1:14; 2:1,11,15,17,19), is absent from C, as is **תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ/הַשָּׁמַיִם** which occurs eight times in B and B' including, notably, once in 2:3 and once in 2:11 which are directly either side of the middle section (1:9,13,14; 2:3,11,17,18,19). The phrase **וְרֵעוֹת רוּחַ**, which appears four times in B and B' (1:14,17; 2:11,35), is also absent from C. There are fourteen words from the root **חָכַם** in B

and B' (1:13,16,16,17,18; 2:3,12,13,14,15,16,16,19,19) and only one is found in C, while **הלל** and **כסל** appear just outside this passage at either end in 2:2 and 2:12, and 2:3 and 2:12 respectively. The verbs **ראה** (1:14,16; 2:3,13), **אמר** (2:1,2,15), **דבר** (1:16; 2:15) and **ידע** (1:17, 2:14), which are important verbs in terms of the author's observations and the conclusions he draws from them<sup>35</sup>, occur in both B and B', but are absent from C. By contrast, **היה** (2:7,7,7,9,10), and **עשה** (2:5,6,8)<sup>36</sup> are the main verbs in C. Also in these seven verses there are eighteen words which occur nowhere else in the book (the highest concentration of such words apart from 12:1-7), while in B and B' there are only seven such words<sup>37</sup>.

These statistics are shown by the use of graphs on the following pages: they seem clearly to set verses 2:4-10 apart from 1:12-2:3 and 2:11-19<sup>38</sup>. The most obvious way in which they are different in terms of theme is that the author seems to digress from his philosophising in the preceding and succeeding verses to relate in detail his hedonistic and totally self-centred pursuits. The emphasis on the first person serves to highlight not only the self-centredness of the enterprise, but also that the author was personally responsible for all that was done. The proliferation of perfect verbs serves to indicate that these actions have already been committed, and that the author is now looking back on what has been achieved. The absence of key words and phrases suggests that the section is only a description of these deeds, which perhaps was prompted by the philosophical considerations which precede it, and is followed by more philosophical deliberations as the implications of what has been done are considered.

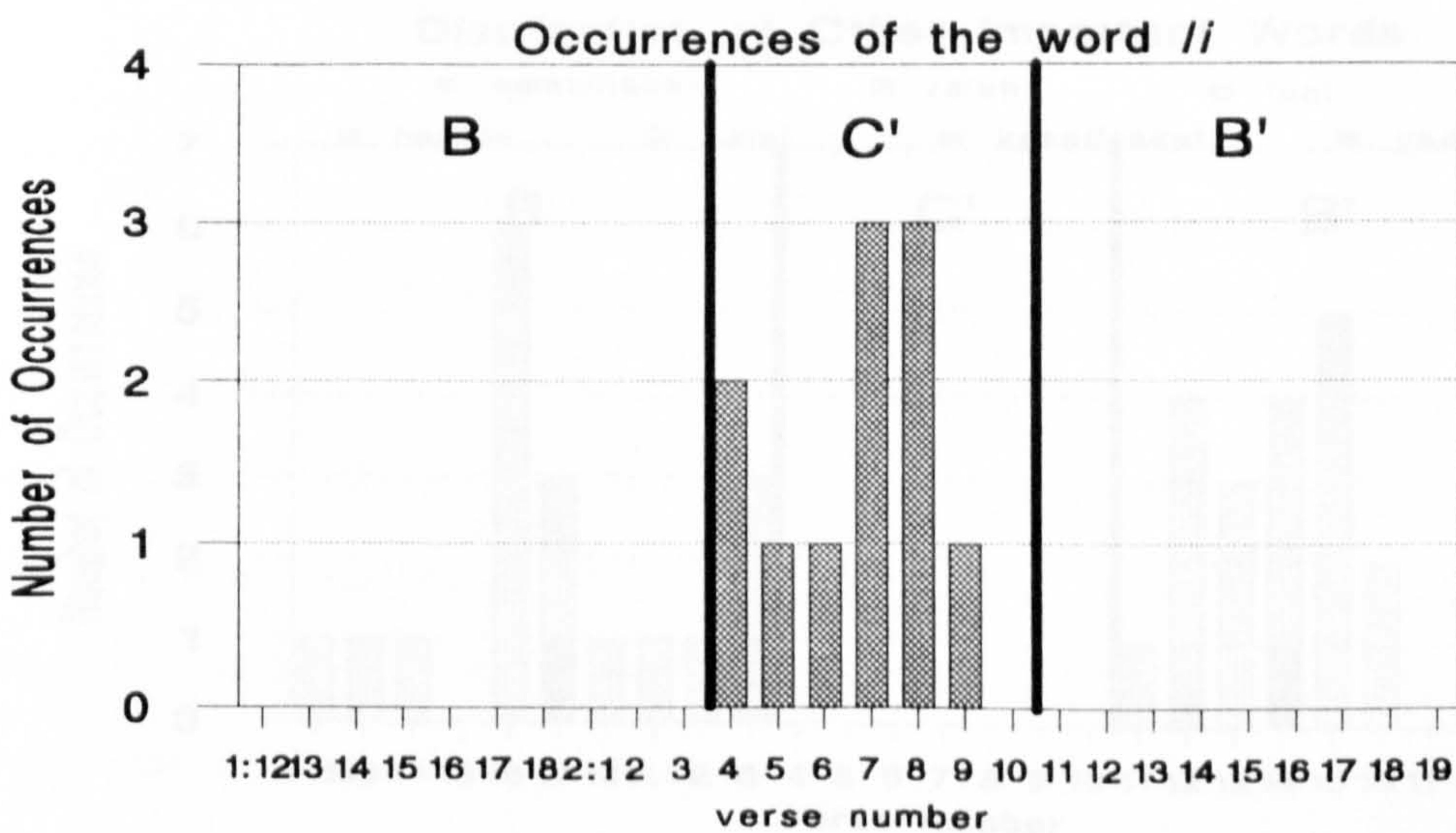
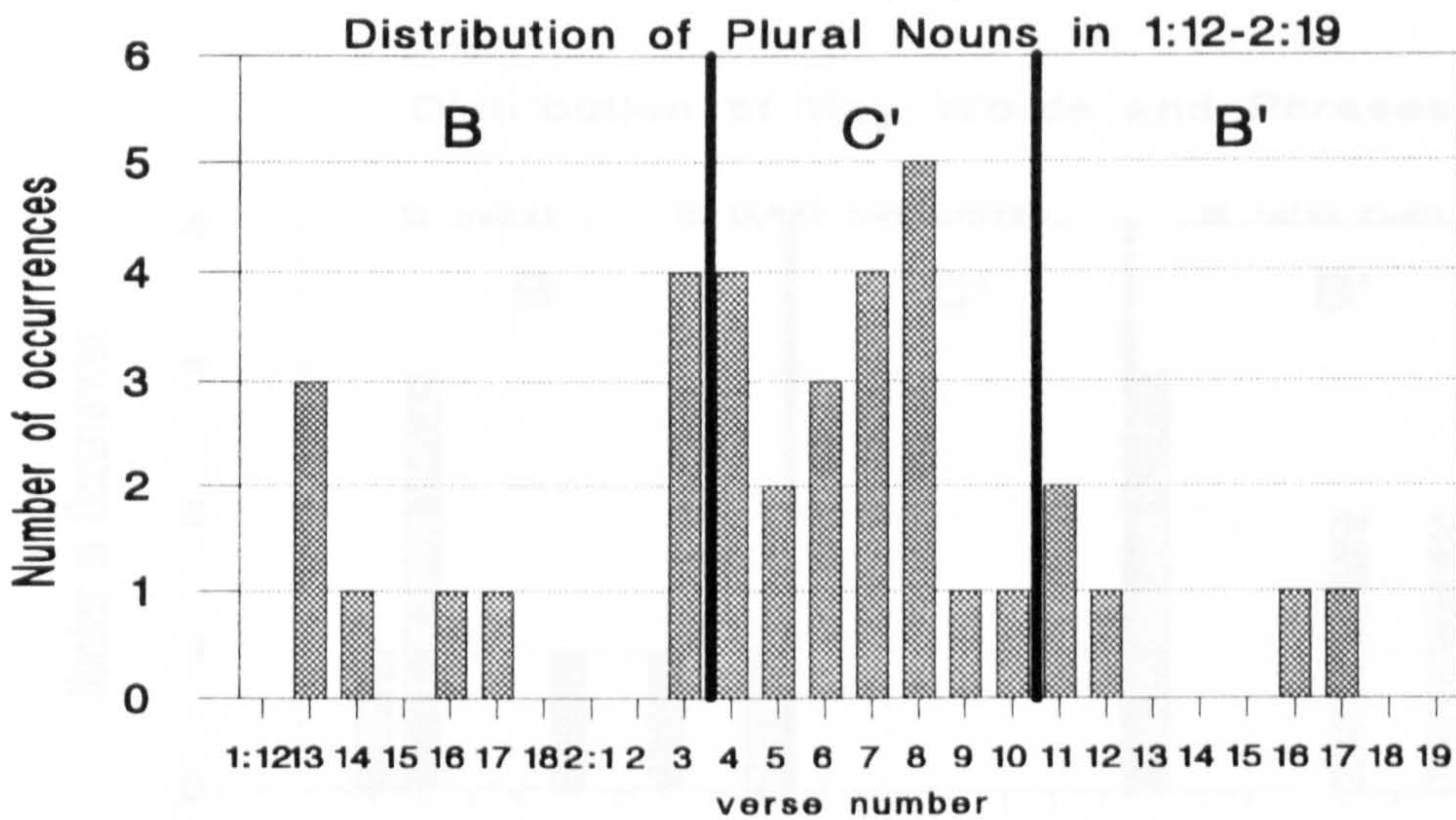
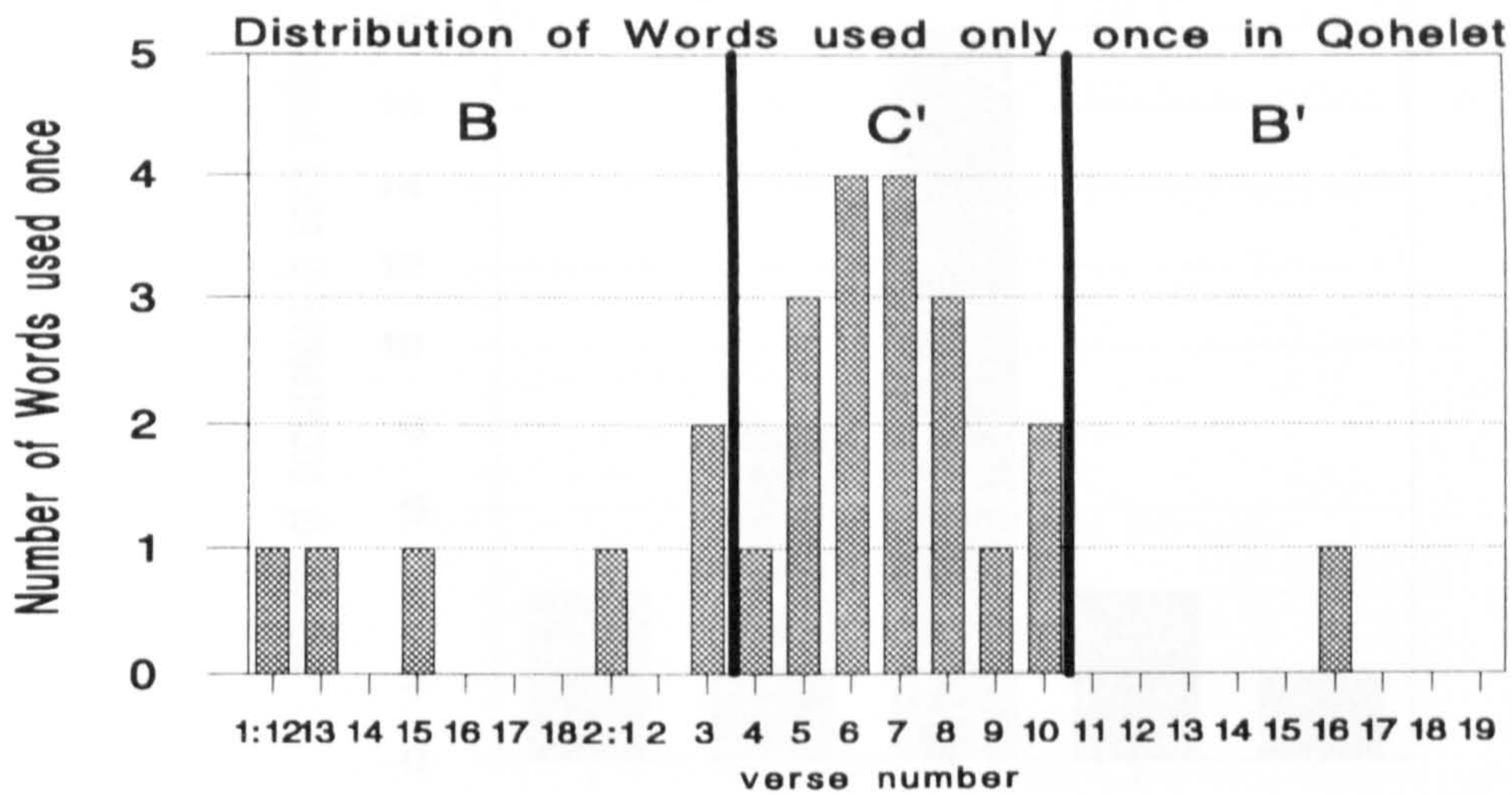
<sup>35</sup>We note below how important a role these verbs play in giving some sort of structure to the various passages in the first few chapters of the book. It is clear that what is 'seen', what is 'said' and what is 'known' are important features of Qohelet.

<sup>36</sup>See n.43 above.

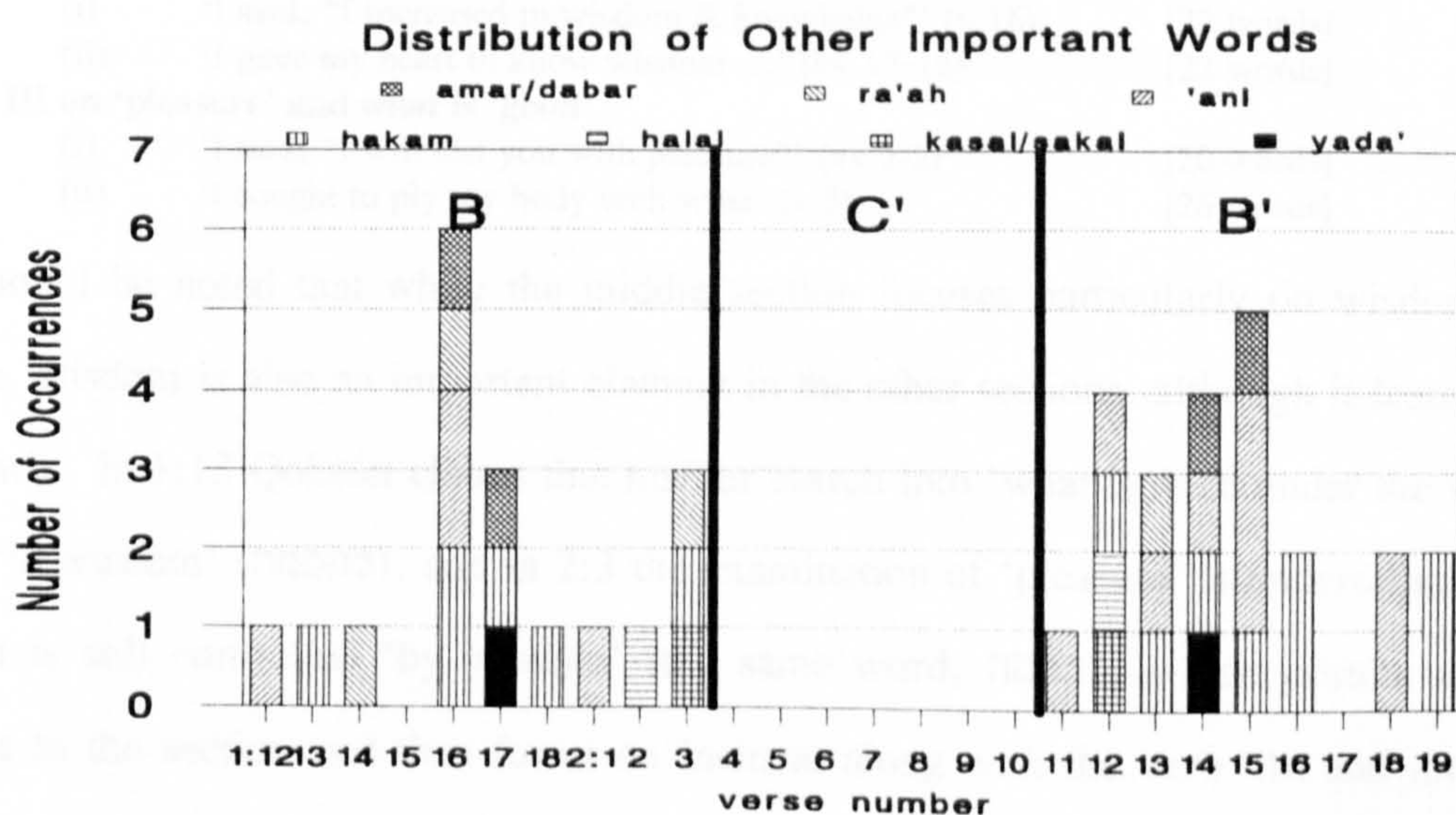
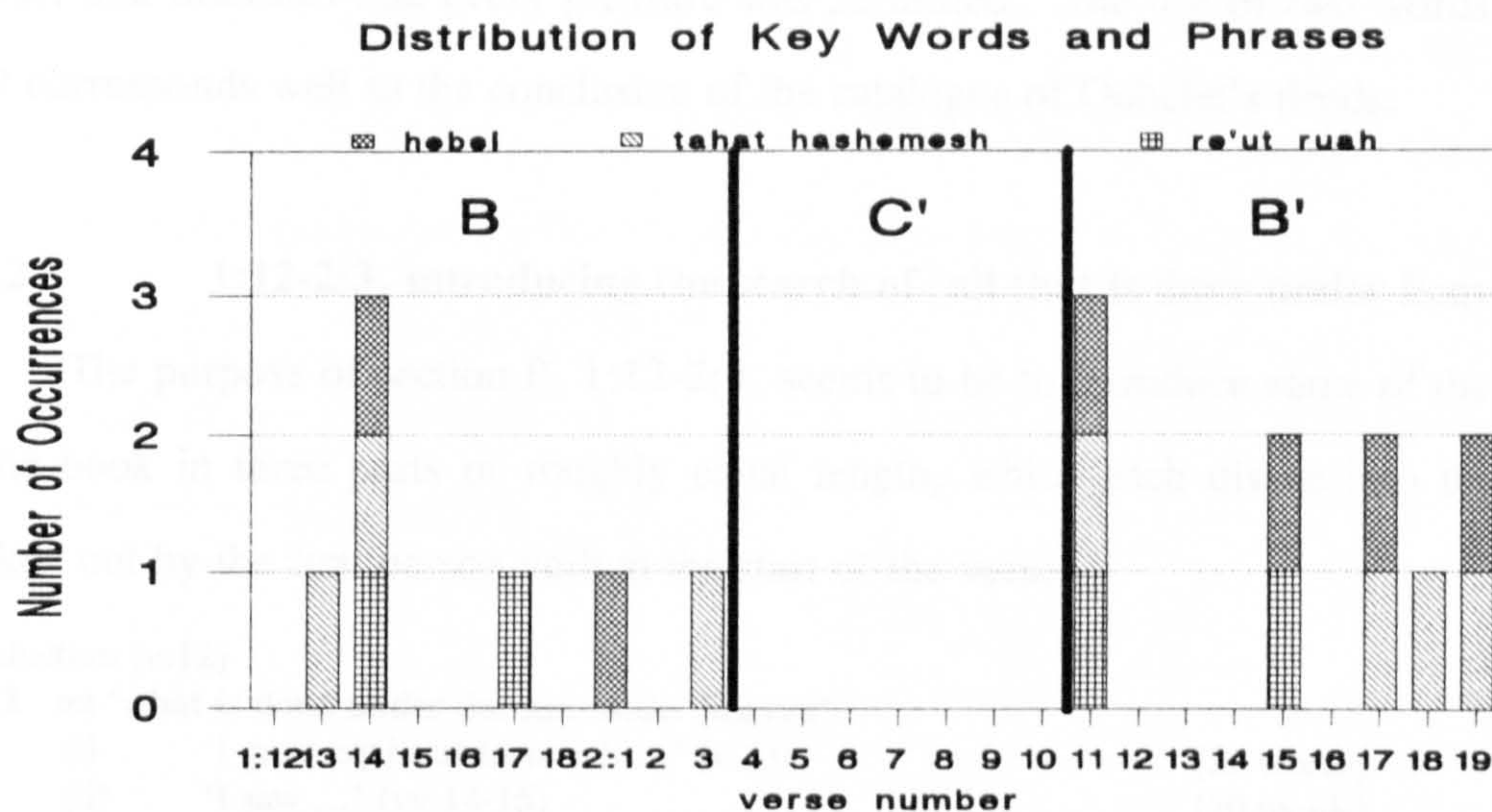
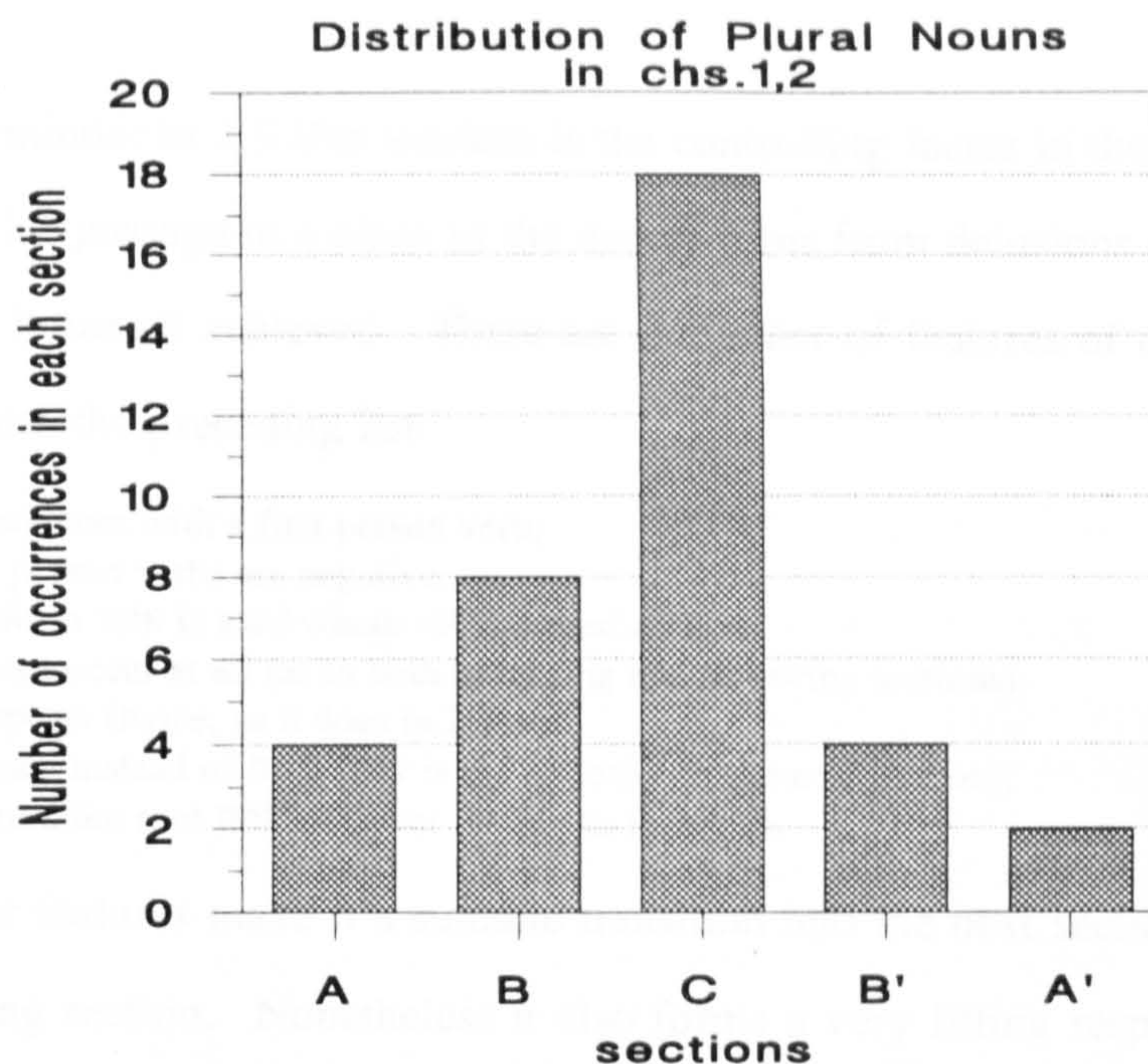
<sup>37</sup>**ישראל** in 1:12; **דרש** in v.13; **מנה** in v.15; **נא** in 2:1; **משך** and **נחג** in v.3; **כרם**, in v.4; **פרה**, **פרד**, **גנן**, in v.5; **צמח**, **יער**, **שקה**, **ברכה** in v.6; **צאן**, **בקח**, **שפחה**, **קנה**, in v.7; **ענג שדה**, **סגלה**, in v.8; **אף**, in v.9 and **מנע**, **אצל**, in v.10; **אז**, in v.15.

<sup>38</sup>It is also worth noting that there are no niphal verbs in C, although there are in A, B and B'. Nor are there any piel verbs in C, although there are in all the other sections. By contrast, there is a higher percentage of hiphil verbs in C than elsewhere: in fact hiphil verbs occur only in B, C and B', but are absent from A and A'. There is only one infinitive construct in C, though more appear in all the other sections. However, this is a particular feature of B where there are 11 infinitive constructs which is the same number as all the other sections added together. 5 out of a total of 11 interjections in Qohelet appear in B and B': there are none in C, nor any in A or A'.











The reminder in 2:9 that wisdom is the controlling factor in the examination of all these deeds brings this passage to a close as the author turns from delusions of grandeur to an assessment of what it has all achieved. There are a number of features of the concluding verse that mark it out from the preceding list:

- it does not start with a first person verb;
- the first person verbs are negative;
- the full form אשר is used where -שׁ was used earlier;
- לִי does not occur at all (as in both preceding and following sections);
- לְבִי reappears (twice, as it does in 2:3);
- עַמִּל is used instead of עָשָׂה (עַמִּל is the inclusio for the next section);
- words from the root שָׂמַח reappear (twice, as in 2:1,2).

These last four features make it a suitable transition into the next section, and also reflect back to the preceding section. Nonetheless it also forms a very fitting response to the immediately preceding verses. It reiterates in negative terms that Qohelet denied himself nothing whatsoever, and indicates that every pleasure was permitted. The use of two words from the root שָׂמַח corresponds well to the conclusion of the catalogue of Qohelet's deeds.

### 3.1.2 1:12-2:3, introducing the search of 'all that is done under heaven/the sun'

The purpose of section B, 1:12-2:3, seems to be to introduce some of the major themes of the book in three parts of roughly equal length, which each divide into two sub-sections marked out by the first person verb at the start of the verse:

#### Introduction (v.12)

#### Part I on 'what is done under the sun/under heaven'

- |      |  |            |
|------|--|------------|
| (i)  | 'I gave my heart to search ...' (v.13) | [21 words] |
| (ii) | 'I saw ...' (vv.14-15)                 | [20 words] |

#### Part II on 'wisdom & knowledge (also introducing madness & folly)'

- |      |  |            |
|------|--|------------|
| (i)  | 'I said, "I increased in wisdom & knowledge"' (v.16) | [22 words] |
| (ii) | 'I gave my heart to know wisdom ...' (vv.17-18)      | [22 words] |

#### Part III on 'pleasure' and what is 'good'

- |      |  |            |
|------|--|------------|
| (i)  | 'I said, "I will test you with pleasure"' (vv.1-2) | [20 words] |
| (ii) | 'I sought to ply my body with wine' (v.3)          | [26 words] |

It should be noted that while the middle section focuses particularly on wisdom and knowledge, wisdom is also an important element in the other sections, although it features only once in each. In 1:13 Qohelet claims that his/her search into 'what is done under the sun' is carried out 'in wisdom' (בְּחִכְמָה), and in 2:3 the examination of 'pleasure' is undertaken while his/her heart is still controlled 'by wisdom' (the same word, בְּחִכְמָה, which occurs only these two times in the section and thus forms an inclusio along with the verb תֹּור and the reference to

39). It seems then that 'wisdom' is a major theme in the section as it is also in 2:11-19. In 2:11-19, however, it is 'wisdom and folly' that is the theme, but in 2:20-26 'wisdom and knowledge' are considered together as they are in the middle part of this section.

Each of the three parts contains a proverb-like saying. This is most obvious in parts one and two where proverbs of similar construction appear at the end of each part:

מעוֹת לֹא-יוֹכֵל לְתַקֵּן וְחִסְרוֹן לֹא-יוֹכֵל לְהַמְנוֹת	1:15
כִּי בָרַב חֲכָמָה רַב-כַּעַס וְיוֹסִיף דַּעַת יוֹסִיף מִכְאוֹב	1:18

Both proverbs consist of two parallel halves which convey the same basic point. Both also use repeated words to emphasise the point. 1:18 seems to express the ultimate futility of 'wisdom and knowledge'; 1:15 expresses the ultimate futility of 'what is done under the sun' - but it is given an additional twist when part of it reappears in 7:13 where it specifically refers to the deeds of God, רָאָה אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי מִי יוֹכֵל לְתַקֵּן אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוּ. The third proverb-like saying is somewhat different: it is not at the end of part three, nor does it follow the same pattern; but it does express the futility of 'pleasure', the theme of that part, in two parallel halves, לְשַׁחֹק אִמְרָתִי מִהוֹלֵל וּלְשִׁמְחָה מִה-זֶה עֹשֶׂה.

Each of the sub-sections of this section, except the second, starts with a first person verb followed by the word לִבִּי:

וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-לִבִּי	(i)
רָאִיתִי	(ii)
דִּבַּרְתִּי אֲנִי עִם-לִבִּי	(iii)
וְאִתְּנָה לִבִּי	(iv)
אִמְרָתִי אֲנִי בִלְבִי	(v)
תִּרְתִּי בִלְבִי	(vi)

What is particularly noteworthy about this is not that each sub-section starts in the same way, in fact they do not because לִבִּי is notably absent from sub-section (ii), but rather that each use of לִבִּי is different: in (i) it is preceded by the object marker; it is absent altogether from (ii); it is preceded by אֲנִי and עִם- in (iii); it appears alone in (iv); in (v) it is preceded by אֲנִי and בִּ-; and in (vi) it is preceded by בִּ- alone. This marks לִבִּי out as another distinctive feature of the passage, and it actually occurs here with greater frequency than elsewhere in the book. It is a

39 occurs again only in 2:21 and 7:23; similarly the verb תִּיר is used elsewhere only in 7:25. Although the expression תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם is common in Qohelet, תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם occurs again only in 3:1. The rarity of these words strengthens the argument for their use here as an inclusio to 1:12-2:3.



feature of Qohelet that a characteristic word or phrase appears several times in a slightly different form each time, and, as we shall see later, each of the verbs in this section is also different.

The themes which this section lays out and which are explored later in the book, include:

examination of wisdom (and knowledge and folly) (1:13,16-17; 2:3)<sup>40</sup>;  
 what is 'given by God' (1:13)<sup>41</sup>;  
 observations (ראיתי) of 'all that is done under the sun' (1:14)<sup>42</sup>;  
 key expressions, תחת השמש, הבל and רעות רוח (1:14,17; 2:1,3)<sup>43</sup>;  
 what Qohelet 'says' (1:16; 2:1,2)<sup>44</sup>;  
 Qohelet's greatness (1:12,16)<sup>45</sup>;  
 'pleasure' (שמחה) (2:1-3)<sup>46</sup>;  
 what is good for people to do (2:1,3)<sup>47</sup>; and  
 the phrase מספר ימי חיים (2:3)<sup>48</sup>.

In particular, the themes of the three sections on 'what is done (עשה)', 'wisdom and knowledge (חכמה and דעת)' and 'pleasure and what is good (שמחה and טוב)' are key themes in later chapters. In addition, the first part of 1:13 is picked up in 8:16:

<sup>40</sup>See 2:11-19; ch.7; and 9:11-10:4, also 10:5-11:7. חכם is one of the most commonly occurring roots in Qohelet. It is used 53 times. What is known and not known is also an important theme in the book, particularly the latter half. The root ידע occurs 44 times.

<sup>41</sup>See 2:26; 3:10,11,13; 5:17,18; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9 and 12:7 (and 12:11?)

<sup>42</sup>What Qohelet 'saw' is an important feature of chs.1-10 - cf 1:14; 2:12,13,24; 3:10,16,22; 4:1,4,7,15; 5:12,17; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9,10,17; 9:11,13; 10:5,7. So also 'what is done under the sun/under heaven' or 'on earth' (which appears to be a synonymous phrase): cf 1:9,13,14; 2:17; 4:3; 8:9,14,16; 9:3,6. עשה is the most commonly occurring verb in Qohelet: the root is used 64 times. The word 'all', כל, is used 91 times. These will be examined in more detail later.

<sup>43</sup>תחת השמש occurs 29 times in all of the first ten chapters except ch.7: 1:3,9,14; 2:11,17,18,19,20,22; 3:16; 4:1,3,7,15; 5:12,17; 6:1,12; 8:9,15,15,17; 9:3,6,9,9,11,13; 10:5; and תחת השמים a further three times, once in each of the first three chapters: 1:13; 2:3; 3:1. הבל occurs 38 times throughout the book except ch.10: 1:2,2,2,2,2,14; 2:1,11,15,17,19,21,23,26; 3:19; 4:4,7,8,16; 5:6,9; 6:2,4,9,11,12; 7:6,15; 8:10,14,14; 9:9,9; 11:8,10; 12:8,8,8; although occurrences in 5:6 and 9:9 are disputed, and הבל at the beginning of 9:2 is often emended to הבל (all these emendations together would give the 37 occurrences of which Wright makes so much, the numerical value of הבל being 37 which divides 6 times into the total number of verses - 222). רעות/רעיון רוח (both forms appearing in our section) occurs 9 times, all in the first half of the book: 1:14,17; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:9.

<sup>44</sup>אמרתי occurs 9 times in the first 9 chapters: 2:1,2,15; 3:17,18; 6:3; 7:23; 8:14; 9:16; and דברתי occurs a further twice: 1:16; 2:15.

<sup>45</sup>Qohelet's greatness is specifically mentioned in 1:16; 2:7,9; but is also implied by his kingship (if indeed this is what the word means) in 1:1,12; by the description of his acquisitions in 2:4-10; and by the description of him as a wise man in 12:9-11.

<sup>46</sup>See 2:1,2,10,10,26; 3:12,22; 4:16; 5:18,19; 7:4; 8:15,15; 9:7; 10:19; 11:8,9 - and particularly the thread of 'call to enjoyment' verses in 2:24; 3:12-13,22; 5:18; 8:15 (cf 9:7-9 and 11:9-10).

<sup>47</sup>The word טוב occurs 54 times in Qohelet - more often even than חכם - and is an important theme in the book, particularly 4:1-5:6 and 7:1-8:7. What it means in different contexts is an important issue which will be addressed later.

<sup>48</sup>Variations on ימי חייהם occur seven times: 2:3; 5:17,19; 6:12; 8:15; 9:9,9. Variations on מספר ימי חייהם occur three times: 2:3; 5:17; 6:12.

1:13a	ונתתי	את-לבי לדרוש ולתור	בחכמה על כל-	
8:16a	כאשר	נתתי	את-לבי לדעת	חכמה
			ולראות את-ענין	
1:13b	אשר	נעשה	תחת השמש	
8:16b	אשר	נעשה	על-הארץ	

The last part of 1:13 is repeated in 3:10:

1:13	הוא	ענין רע	נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו	
3:10	ראיתי	את-הענין אשר	נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו	

1:14 is very similar to both 2:11 and 2:17<sup>49</sup>:

1:14a	ראיתי	את-כל-המעשים שנעשו תחת השמש		
2:11a	ופניתי אני	בכל-מעשי שעשו ...		
2:17a	ושנאתי את-החיים כי רע עלי	המעשה שנעשה תחת השמש <sup>50</sup>		
1:14b	והיה	הכל הבל ורעות רוח		
2:11b	והיה	הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש		
2:17b	כי	הכל הבל ורעות רוח		

1:15 is alluded to by 7:13:

1:15	מעות	לא-יוכל לתקן	וחסרון לא-יוכל להמנות	
7:13		מי יוכל לתקן	את אשר עותו	

The middle part of 1:16 is picked up in 2:9 (see also 2:7):

1:16	הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה על	כל-אשר-	היה לפני על-	ירושלם
2:9	וגדלתי והוספתי	מכל ש-	היה לפני	בירושלם אף חכמה עמדה לי

The first part of 1:17 is alluded to by 7:25:

1:17	ואתנה	לבי לדעת	חכמה	ודעת...
7:25	סבותי אני	ולבי לדעת ולתור ובקש	חכמה וחשבון	ולדעת...

The middle of 1:17 links up with 2:12 and 7:25 (see also 10:13):

1:17	לדעת	חכמה	ודעת	הוללות ושכלות
2:12	לראות	חכמה		והוללות ושכלות
7:25	לדעת ...	חכמה ...	ולדעת רשע כסל	והסכלות הוללות

1:18 is recalled by 7:12:

1:18	כי ברב חכמה רב-כעס	ויוסיף דעת	יוסיף מכאוב	
7:12	כי בצל החכמה בצל הכסף	ויתרון דעת חכמה	תחיה בעליה	

And 2:3 ties in with 6:12:

2:3	אי-זה	טוב לבני	האדם	אשר יעשו תחת השמים מספר ימי חייהם
6:12	מה-	טוב	לאדם בחיים	מספר ימי חיי

<sup>49</sup>Actually these are the only three times הכל הבל and ורעות רוח occur together: ורעות/רעיון רוח occurs four times (2:26; 4:4,16 and 6:9), but in none of these verses does תחת השמש appear as it does in 1:14; 2:11,17.

<sup>50</sup>The development from ראיתי to ואין יתרון ... ופניתי אני is important and will be discussed below.



It should be observed that in each case there is sufficient similarity between the verses to enable a careful reader to notice the connection, but on no occasion is there a word-for-word repetition. This is a recurring feature of Qohelet.

2:3 also displays a number of key similarities with a major thread of verses that runs through the book (and which we shall consider in more depth later) - the verses that issue the 'call to enjoyment':

2:3b	אשר-	אראה	אי-זה טוב לבני	האדם	אשר יעשו	תחת השמים
2:24a			אין-טוב	באדם		
3:12a	ידעתי כי	אין טוב	בם		כי אם-	לשמוח
3:22a	וראיתי כי	אין טוב		מאשר		ישמח
5:17a	הנה אשר-	ראיתי	אני טוב	אשר-יפה		
8:15b			אין-טוב	לאדם	תחת השמש כי אם-	
2:24b	שיאכל ושתה והראה את-נפשו	טוב	ב- עמלו			
3:13a	וגם כל-האדם	שיאכל ושתה וראה	טוב	בכל-עמלו		
5:17b	לאכול ולשתות ולראות	טובה	בכל-עמלו			
8:15c	לאכול ולשתות	ולשמוח והוא ילוננו	ב- עמלו			
2:3c	...יעשו	תחת השמים מספר ימי	חיהם			
3:12b	ולעשות טוב	בחיו				
3:22b	האדם	במעשיו				
5:17c	שיעמל	תחת-השמש מספר ימי-	חיו			
8:15d		ימי	חיו			
2:24c	גם-זה ראיתי אני כי מיד	האלהים היא				
3:13b		מתת	אלהים היא			
3:22c		כי-הוא חלקו...				
5:17d		אשר-נתן-לו האלהים	כי-הוא חלקו			
8:15e		אשר-נתן-לו האלהים	תחת השמש			

(In this diagram the verses read normally from right to left, ignoring the gaps - e.g., 8:15b,c and d following straight on from 8:15a. However, the verses have been spaced out so that the comparable parts of the verses lie directly next to each other in columns.) **ראה בטוב** in v.1 also ties in with this thread, as do the occurrences of **שמחה** in vv.1,2. This theme will be examined in greater detail later. We might note here again that there are marked similarities between all the verses, but that they are all different.

2:3 serves as a link between 1:12-2:3 and 2:4-10, in the same way that 2:10 forms a link with 2:11-19, and 2:18-19 ties in with 2:20-26. We also observe below that 2:11 picks up on 2:4-10, and the same applies to 2:20 which connects 2:20-26 with the preceding section. These links prevent sharp distinctions between the sections and promote a sense of the unity of

the two chapters. Indeed, as we noted above, 2:17 is very similar to both 2:11 and 1:14 and helps to tie all these sections closely together. 1:4-11 is an exception because there seems to be no attempt to link it with what follows.

The phrase עַד אֲשֶׁר-אֶרְאֶה אִי-זֶה טוֹב לְבִנֵּי הָאָדָם יַעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם in 2:3 points forward to the 'deeds' which are described in the following section, and the use of three words from the root עשה in 2:11 indicates the conclusion to the quest initiated in this verse. The phrase אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם also serves as an inclusio for our section because it occurs in the first verse (v.13) after the introduction as well as at the end. What makes it particularly suitable for such an inclusio is the use of the unusual expression תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם, which occurs only once more in Qohelet, in 3:1, instead of the usual תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם which is used 29 times. This means that the section starts and ends with a reference to a 'search' 'in wisdom' of 'what is done under heaven':

Introduction (v.12)

Part I on 'what is done under the sun/under heaven'

- (i) 'I gave my heart to search ...' + inclusio (v.13)
- (ii) 'I saw ...' (vv.14-15)

Part II on 'wisdom & knowledge (also introducing madness & folly)'

- (i) 'I said, "I increased in wisdom & knowledge"' (v.16)
- (ii) 'I gave my heart to know wisdom ...' (vv.17-18)

Part III on 'pleasure'

- (i) 'I said, "I will test you with pleasure"' (vv.1-2)
- (ii) 'I sought to ply my body with wine' + inclusio (v.3)

### 3.1.3 2:11-19, a chiasmus on wisdom and folly

The section from 2:11-19, B', is closely linked with both the preceding and the following sections. The phrase in v.11, כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂי שְׁעָשׂוּ יָדַי, links it with the previous section, and indicates that this verse serves as a conclusion to that passage as well as introducing this section. Thus, v.11 might be read as the author 'turning *from*' the deeds he described in the previous section, and v.12 as him 'turning *to*' consider particularly the value of wisdom and folly. The use twice of עַמַּל also serves to link this verse back to v.10, and in the same way the use of עַמַּל twice in each of vv.18,19 anticipates its use in vv.20,21,22,24 in the final section. עַמַּל thus forms something of an inclusio to this section which connects it with the sections on either side. However, v.11 also reintroduces key words and phrases which were



absent from the previous section, and which are used in higher concentration in the latter half of ch.2 than anywhere else in Qohelet: אני, הבל, רעות רוח, יתרון and תחת השמש<sup>51</sup>. In fact, the whole verse is little more than a string of key words and phrases (as also are 1:14 and 2:17), and in this way it serves to link the description of Qohelet's superlative deeds with the major themes of the two chapters, and to pass sweeping judgment on the value of all he had achieved. The clause, הבל ורעות רוח, and the expression, תחת השמש also serve as an inclusio for the section. Indeed, הבל ורעות רוח functions as an inclusio for the three sections B, C, and B' because it occurs 29 words from the beginning of section B and 29 words from the end of section B'. Each time the clause is used it immediately follows a description of deeds that are done:

1:14	את-כל-המעשים	שנעשו	תחת השמש	והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח
2:11	בכל-מעשי	שעשו ידי	ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח	
2:17	המעשה	שנעשה	תחת השמש	כי- הכל הבל ורעות רוח

The first and third of these are more similar (but not identical) which is appropriate if they serve as an inclusio. They refer to *all* the deeds done under the sun. The middle one relates to the section (C) describing Qohelet's deeds, and specifically refers to these deeds. It seems then that these sections which discuss what is done under the sun start by describing all these deeds as הבל, and end in the same way, while in the central section Qohelet's own deeds are described using the same terms.

The opening verb of v.11, ופניתי, seems to indicate that the author is turning to a new section, and this is confirmed by a pattern which characterises the section. The pattern is formed from the main verbs in the section (and again we pay more attention to words than to verse divisions), and shows a clear progression of thought through the section:

<sup>51</sup>37.9% (11 out of 29) of the total occurrences of אני; 18.4% (7 out of 38) of הבל; 33.3% (3 out of 9) of רעות רוח; 22.2% (4 out of 18) of words from the root יתר; and 18.8% (6 out of 32) of תחת השמש. All these in only 6.8% of the total number of verses in the book.

ופניתי

ופניתי

לראות

וראיתי

וידעתי

ואמרתי

ודברתי

ושנאתי

ושנאתי

The passage starts with a turn *from* all the deeds of the previous section, which had ultimately proved so fruitless (v.11), followed by a turn *to* consider wisdom and folly (v.12). This is the main subject of the whole section as is indicated by the presence of both words in every verse except v.17, which connects back to the previous section and to 1:14, and v.18, which is completed by v.19 in which the words do appear. In fact, vv.11,17,18 where חכמה and סכל/כסל do not occur, make up the inclusio to the section, and display instead words and phrases which are characteristic of Qohelet as a whole. We should also note that only at the end of ch.9 and beginning of ch.10 is the frequency of these words so high<sup>52</sup>.

The author, while considering wisdom and folly, sees that there is advantage in wisdom over folly (v.13), but knows that the wise and foolish die just the same (v.14), which prompts him to ask why he has been so wise (v.15a), and to state that this too is *hebel* (v.15b-16) (we shall consider the meaning of this word below). The fact that wise and foolish meet the same fate leads him to hate his life and all the deeds he has performed (v.17, linking with the previous section) and the work he has done (v.18-19, linking with the next section). If the second half of v.14, וידעתי גם-אני שמקרה אחד יקרה את-כלם, is taken as the centre of the passage as the chiasmic pattern indicates, up to this point in the passage the treatment of wisdom is positive, revolving round the phrase יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות. However, after the centre wisdom is viewed rather differently, the key statement being אין זכרון לחכם עם-הכסיל לעולם

<sup>52</sup> סכל/כסל occurs in 9:17; 10:1,2,3,3; and חכם in 9:10,11,13,15,15,16,16,17,18; 10:1,2. The only other major concentration of these roots is in ch.7: סכל/כסל occurs in 7:4,5,6,9,17,25,25; and חכם in 7:4,5,7,10,11,12,12,16,19,19,23,23,25.



in v.16. In fact, if everything preceding לראות is regarded as an introduction, and everything following the first ושנאתי as a conclusion, the following structure emerges:

A introduction (and link back to previous section)

examination of wisdom and folly

B there is an advantage of wisdom over folly  
illustration

יש יתרון

C BUT I know that one fate comes to both

question regarding the ultimate value of wisdom

B' there is no remembrance of the wise, like the foolish  
illustration

אין זכרון

A' conclusion (and link forward to next section)

The introduction and conclusion are characterised by the use of key phrases and the roots עמל and עשה, while B and B' are characterised by the use of חכם and סכל/כסל once in each of the three lines, and the phrases יש יתרון (in B) and אין זכרון (in B') at the centre. Hence, the basic skeleton of the passage is:

there is an advantage in wisdom over folly  
but I know that one fate befalls both wise and foolish  
therefore there is no remembrance of wise or foolish

The logical progression through the section, the abundant use of key phrases at the beginning and end, the inclusios, the theme throughout of wisdom and folly, the connections back to the previous section and forward to the next section<sup>53</sup>, the chiasmic structure leading up to and then away from the central statement, וידעתי גם-אני שמקרה אחר יקרה את-כלם, around which the passage revolves, and the key phrase in each half around which that half revolves, all support the contention that 2:11-19 is a unit.

We might combine the diagrams we used above to indicate some of the characteristics of this section:

<sup>53</sup>The references to [ה]אדם שיהיה אחרי (v.18) and האדם שיבוא אחרי המלך (v.12) seem to be linked to each other and also to point back to the previous section and forward to the next. The first asks, '[in light of the foregoing] what more can one do who comes after the king (i.e., me)?', while the second states, 'I must leave everything for which I worked to one who comes after me (i.e., the king)'. The two clauses do not, however, seem to fit into the chiasmic pattern we have outlined - this is typical of Qohelet.

ופניתי - I turned away from my deeds	POINTS BACK TO 2:4-10
inclusio: עמל שעמלתי	
inclusio: הכל הבל ורעות רוח	
inclusio: תחת השמש	
ופניתי - I turned to	
לראות - theme of this section 'wisdom & folly'	
וראות - advantage of wisdom over folly	
illustrating the point	
וידעתי - 'one fate befalls both'	CENTRE
ואמרתי - 'why have I been so wise?'	
ודברתי - no remembrance of wise or fool	אין זכרון
illustrating the point	
ושנאתי - I hated life because of my deeds	POINTS BACK TO 2:4-10; 1:14
inclusio: תחת השמש	
inclusio: הכל הבל ורעות רוח	
inclusio: עמל שעמלתי	
ושנאתי - I hated my work	POINTS FORWARD TO 2:20-26

### 3.1.4 1:4-11, an introductory poem on 'cycles'

We turn our attention now to the opening section, A, 1:4-11. This section is marked off from the next section by the self-introduction in 1:12 which initiates the intensively first person passages which follow. By contrast there is no first person usage whatsoever in these verses. The section falls into two equal halves which overlap in the middle (noting again that words rather than verse divisions are important):

- I. vv.4-8a (54 words)  
shared line - כל-הדברים יגעים לא-יוכל איש לדבר
- II. vv.8-11 (54 words)

The first half focuses in rather abstract terms on cycles in nature, while the second half considers this endless repetition from a human perspective. The cycles in nature are represented by the use in vv.4-8a of predominantly participles (while vv.8-11 contain mostly imperfect verbs), and also by constant repetition of words and letters: שם, מקום, השמש, זרח, בא, דור, הרוח, הרוח, כל, שב, הים, הנחלים, דבר are all used twice; the root סבב (which itself emphasises the cycles) occurs four times; the preposition אל- appears five times; the root הלך occurs six times; the 'o' sound is very prevalent in vv.4-6 (particularly in v.6 where it conveys the sound of the cycling wind); and the final *mem* appears on most of the words in v.7 and the beginning of v.8. If a key word is to be sought from this section it would be the root הלך, which, along with the preposition אל, emphasises constant movement. The centre of this section greatly



exaggerates the cyclical nature of the wind, **סובב סבב הולך הרוח ולע-סביבתיו שב הרוח**. Preceding this centre are sixteen words which emphasise the comprehensiveness of the sun's movements - including the ambiguous first part of v.6 which refers both backwards and forwards so that all four points of the compass are covered,

**וזרח השמש ובא השמש ואל-מקומו שואף זורח הוא שם הולך אל-דרום וסובב אל-צפון**

Following this centre are sixteen words which picture the cycle of water running down to the sea then returning (presumably by evaporation and precipitation) to flow again,

**כל-הנחלים הלכים אל-הים והים איננו מלא אל-מקום שהנחלים הלכים שם הם שבים ללכת**

Either side of these again are the introduction to the section of seven words (and 26 letters), and the conclusion also of seven words (and 26 letters). Both *may* refer to the human sphere, particularly the first four and last four words:

**דור הלך ודור בא והארץ לעולם עמדת  
כל-הדברים יגעים לא-יוכל איש לדבר**

This gives the following pattern for 1:4-8a:

introduction	7 words	┌ 4 words
the sun cycle (& the 4 points of the compass)	16 words	└ 3 words
the cycles of the wind	8 words	
the water cycle	16 words	
conclusion	7 words	└ 3 words
		┌ 4 words

Although none of the key phrases which characterise Qohelet appear in these verses, the use twice of both **השמש** and **הרוח** does serve to anticipate two of these phrases. However, in vv.8a-11 the key phrase **השמש תחת** occurs precisely at the centre indicating an emphasis on the realm where human activity takes place.

Vv.8a-11, which make up the second half of the section, also use a great deal of repetition. Words connected with 'speaking' occur four times (although, as we will discuss later, both **הדברים** in v.8 and **דבר** in v.10 are ambiguous). The root for 'seeing', **ראה**, occurs twice. That there is nothing 'new' is emphasised by the use of **חדש** twice. And that 'no-one is remembered by those who come after' is emphasised by the repetition in v.11 of the word for 'remembrance', **זכרון**, and the word for 'those who (or that which) come(s) after', **אחרנים**. The words **ראשנים** and **אחרנים** in this verse tie in with the phrase **דור הלך ודור בא** in v.4,

which as well as referring to the endless cycles of nature may also refer to the continual replacement of one generation by another.

The word which is most often repeated in vv.8-11 is *היה*, occurring seven times. It emphasises that what 'will be' in the future is simply the same as what 'has been' in the past, and this further serves to connect the repetition of nature in the first half to the human realm in the second. This comes across most clearly in the carefully balanced and highly repetitive first half to v.9:

מה-שהיה	הוא	שיהיה
ומה-שנעשה	הוא	שיעשה

and in the second part of v.10, *כבר היה לעלמים אשר היה מלפננו*. These two verses form a small, balanced (2 x *היה*, 1 x *חדש* and 13 words in each half), chiasmus which sets the statement that 'there is nothing new under the sun' in v.9b against the assertion in v.10a that 'there is a thing of which it is said, "See this, *it* is new!"' However, v.10a serves as an Aunt Sally set up only to be knocked down again in v.10b by a restatement of v.9a:

- 9a     what has been (*היה*) is what will be (*היה*)...
- 9b     there is nothing new (*חדש*) under the sun
- 10a    there is a thing of which it is said, 'See this, *it* is new (*חדש*)!'
- 10b    it already has been (*היה*) in the ages which were (*היה*) before us

Vv.10,11 relate to each other differently. Again there is the balance between two verses of thirteen words each, but here there is an alternating pattern which, rather than portraying the circularity suggested by the chiasmus of vv.9,10, pictures development from past and present concerns to consideration of the future, and also from positive assertions to negative ones. Thus the positive statement that 'there is a thing...' in v.10a relates to the negative assertion that 'there is no remembrance...' in 11a; and the reference to the 'ages which were before us' in v.10b is contrasted with the remembrance which *will* not be of those who (or perhaps that which) *will* come after in 11b:

- 10a    there *is* a thing of which it is said, 'See this, it is new!'
- 10b    it already *has* been (*היה*) in the ages which *were* (*היה*) before us
- 11a    there *is not* remembrance of those who came before...
- 11b    there *will not* (*היה*) be remembrance of them among those who *will* (*היה*) come after

The cyclical nature of things is also indicated in the carefully wrought pattern in vv.9-11. Each of these verses is the same length, 13 words, and divides into two halves (according



to the way the verses are set out in BHS, and according to the *atnah* in vv.9,10, but not in v.11 - might this be an example of punctuation which confuses rather than aids reading?): the first half of the verses decreases in length while the second half increases in length thus,

(8 words)	מה-שהיה הוא שיהיה ומה-שנעשה הוא שיעשה	v.9
(5 words)	ואין כל-הדש תחת השמש	
(7 words)	יש דבר שיאמר ראה-זה חדש הוא	v.10
(6 words)	כבר היה לעלמים אשר היה מלפננו	
(6 words)	אין זכרון לראשנים וגם לאחרנים שיהיו	v.11
(7 words)	לא יהיה להם זכרון עם שיהיו לאחרנה	

This may explain why אשר is used only in v.10b while the shortened form, -ש-, is used on the other seven occasions that the particle of relation appears in these verses. In fact, this is the only occurrences of the full form in 1:1-11.

The constancy of the verse length may represent the constancy of what happens, and is done, on earth, while the interwoven decreasing and increasing patterns provide a structural illustration of the cycles on which this section focuses: as one thing decreases, another increases to take its place. The increasing series may pick up on the three clauses of four words in v.8. It should also be noted that the clauses beginning with לא-/אין in vv.8-11 increase in length:

(4 words)	לא-יוכל איש לדבר	v.8b
(4 words)	לא-תשבע עין לראות	v.8c
(4 words)	לא-תמלא און משמע	v.8d
(5 words)	ואין כל-הדש תחת השמש	v.9c
(6 words)	אין זכרון לראשנים וגם לאחרנים שיהיו	v.11ab
(7 words)	לא יהיה להם זכרון עם שיהיו לאחרנה	v.11cd

This might indicate increasing negativity.

The negatives לא- and אין are used six times in total<sup>54</sup>, and this serves to link the observations of repetition in nature, in the first part of the section, in a negative way to the human realm in the second part: speaking, seeing and hearing do *not* satisfy; *nothing* is new; and *no-one* is remembered by those who come after. It may be significant that the repeated use of the preposition ל- in vv.4-7 is replaced by the negative adverb לא- which uses the same letters in reverse order. It is certainly significant that the three cycling elements in nature, sun, wind and water, are replaced by three human senses, speech, sight and hearing,

<sup>54</sup>These words occur very frequently in Qohelet, לא 65 times, and אין 44 times. By contrast, ש is used only 16 times.

which do not function to completeness (whatever the implications of this may be). Moreover, the stable element in nature, the earth, is replaced by something, perhaps human generations, which are not remembered.

### 3.1.5 2:20-26, conclusion to the first part of the book

The start of the final section, A', is indicated by the verb **וּסַבֹּתִי**, 'I turned', which serves a similar purpose to the twin use of **וּפְנִיתִי** at the beginning of the previous section. However, there is not a clear thematic distinction between the two sections in so much as **עָמַל** is a major theme of the final two verses of the previous section, and is also a major focus of the first three verses of this section. This is clear from the fact that there is a much greater frequency of words from this root here than anywhere else in Qohelet, with ten out of a total of thirty-five occurrences in these five verses. Eight of these occurrences allude to the key question in 1:3, which is also picked up in 2:11:

תחת השמש	יעמל	ש-	בכל- עמלו	מה-יתרון לאדם	1:3
תחת השמש	עמלתי ...	ש-	ב- עמל		2:11
תחת השמש	עמל	ש- אני	את- כל- עמלי		2:18
תחת השמש	עמלתי ושחכמתי	ש-	בכל- עמלי		2:19
תחת השמש	עמלתי	ש-	כל-העמל		2:20
תחת השמש	עמל	שהוא	בכל- עמלו וברעיון לבו		2:22

It is noteworthy that the expression is never used twice in identical form, like the use of **לְבִי** in the second section. This is an important feature of Qohelet, which contributes to the ambiguity of the book.

However, although the theme of **עָמַל** traverses the two sections, it receives different treatment in each. In the previous section it was discussed as part of the topic of 'wisdom and folly', here it forms part of the conclusion to the whole of the first two chapters where 'wisdom and knowledge' is more important. Moreover, after the introductory v.20, it is 'his' work rather than 'my' work which is the subject: this is important in light of our observations earlier of first and third person usage in these two chapters.

The section divides into an introduction plus two almost equal parts, the first of which is negative and the second of which is positive - except for the last five words:

Introduction (v.20)		
Part I - negative -	(vv.21-23)	[45 words]
Part II - positive -	(vv.24-26)	[47 words]



The negativity and the positivity are both explained by three statements starting with **כי**:

#### Introduction

- Part I *negative* -because a person works with wisdom, knowledge and skill to give his/her portion to someone who does not deserve it  
 -because a person has nothing (implied) from all the work he/she strives at  
 -because both day and night are troublesome
- Part II *positive* -because it is from the hand of God  
 -because no-one can achieve anything apart from him (me?)  
 -because the 'good' are given wisdom and knowledge but the 'bad' are made to work for the benefit of the 'good'

The contrast between the two parts is enhanced by the words that are used in them: the first half contains such words as **לא** (twice), **הבל** (twice), **רעה**, **רעיון**, **מכאבים**, and **כעס** as well as six occurrences of **עמל** in negative contexts; the second half uses instead **טוב** (four times), **אכל** (twice), **שתה**, **אלהים** (twice), **נתן** (three times) and **עמל** only once - and this time in a very positive context. Of course, the second half also commences with the first of the 'call to enjoyment' verses which we noted above. The key words in the first half are **עמל** (6 times), **אדם** (3 times) and **לב** (3 times), which may suggest that the reason for the negativity is that people working for their own benefit ultimately achieve nothing. On the other hand, the key words in the second half are **טוב** (4 times), **נתן** (3 times) and **האלהים** (2 times - but particularly noteworthy because it has occurred only once previously in the book, in 1:13), which may suggest that the reason for the positivity is that things are good specifically when they are received as the gift of God. Thus, although **חכמה ודעת**, picked up from the second section, forms something of an inclusio for this section - as it occurs in the first verse of part I and the last verse of part II - in the first half it is the 'wisdom and knowledge' at which people work 'under the sun' (this phrase occurring twice in the first half and not at all in the second) for their own ends, while in the second half it is the 'wisdom and knowledge' which is given by God to those who please him. We should note also that **ענין** occurs once in each half of this section, but is decidedly negative in part I while it is positive for the 'good' in part II. This recalls the statement in 1:13, **הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים האדם לענות בו**. The questions then arise, to whom does 1:13 refer and who is referred to as **טוב לפני האלהים** (twice) in 2:26. This

question is perhaps even more troubling in light of the final clause of the section, and of the whole structure, גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח, which casts a shadow of ambiguity over these two chapters. Moreover, the final two words, ורעות רוח, upset not only the perfect balance of this final section, intro. + 45 words + 45 [+2] words, but also of the overall structure of all five sections together: 101 words + 138 words + 94 words + 138 words + 101 [+2] words. This serves to draw particular attention to the phrase.

The final verse of this section, 2:26, is itself a very carefully constructed chiasmus. לאדם שטוב לפניו in the first half of the verse is balanced by לטוב לפני האלהים later in the verse. The subject of the sentence, האלהים, is held back to the last possible moment, adding emphasis to it. In between these two synonymous phrases is placed a contrasting one, לחוטא. This gives a circular structure to the verse:

לאדם שטוב לפניו

לחוטא

לטוב לפני האלהים

The balance is maintained by abbreviating the phrase לאדם שטוב to לטוב, and by expanding לפני האלהים to לפני. Three words are then used to describe the lots of הטוב and החוטא: if the circularity is maintained then חכמה is contrasted with כנוס, דעת with אסוף, and שמחה with ענין. Our structure would then look like this:

לאדם שטוב לפניו

חכמה

דעת

שמחה

ולחוטא

ענין

אסוף

כנוס

לטוב לפני האלהים

There is still an important element missing from this structure, the root נתן. This root appears twenty-eight times in Qohelet (1:13,13,17; 2:21,26,26,26; 3:10,11,13; 4:17; 5:5,17,18,18;



6:2; 7:2,7,21; 8:9,15,16; 9:1,9; 10:6; 11:2; 12:7,11), fairly evenly spread throughout the book - except that three of its occurrences, that is over a tenth of the total number, are in this one verse. In 1:17 we read, ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות - here the author 'gave him- or herself' to חכמה and דעת, then in the next verse comes to a very negative conclusion about them; by contrast, in 2:26 חכמה and דעת given by God seem to receive much more positive treatment.

After the introductory conjunction, כי, the structure of 2:26 now looks like this:

לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן

חכמה

ודעת

ושמחה

ולחוטא נתן

ענין

לאסוף

ולכנוס

לתת לטוב לפני האלהים

However, the neat structure of the verse is upset by the addition on the end of, גם-זה הבל, ורעות רוח. But this conclusion is one feature, along with reference to 'wisdom and knowledge' which we mentioned above, that makes vv.21,26 suitable as an inclusio to the section. The similarities might be represented thus:

v.21a	כי יש	אדם ש-	עמלו	בחכמה ובדעת ובכשרון
v.26a	כי	לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן		חכמה ו-דעת ושמחה
v.21b	ולאדם שלא עמל-בו	יתננו חלקו		
v.26b	ולחוטא	נתן	ענין לאסוף ולכנוס לתת לטוב לפני האלהים	
v.21c	גם-זה הבל ורעה רבה			
v.26c	גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח			

### 3.2 Relating structure to interpretation

Having closely examined the structure of chs.1,2, it is important now to show how it might assist in our understanding of the book. 2:4-10 is the centre of the first two chapters of Qohelet. It is a description of the peak of human achievement directed to selfish ends. The

preceding sections build up to the centre, commencing in 1:4-8a with a description of repetitions in nature which in 1:8-11 is applied to the human realm, then moving in 1:12-2:3 to a study of all that people achieve 'under heaven' (or 'under the sun'). 2:4-10 forms the climax of this process. The following section, 2:11-19, then describes increasing disillusionment with what has been achieved (using now mostly the word עֲמַל in place of עָשָׂה, the two words seeming to function as synonyms<sup>55</sup>), leading to the statement of despair in v.20 followed by the three explanatory verses, vv.21-23. However, there seems to be a dramatic turnaround in v.24 where the gift of God is introduced into the equation: while what has been achieved as the result of כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂי שְׁעָשׂוּ יָדַי proves to be futile (2:11), that which comes from יַד הָאֱלֹהִים is different (2:24). At first glance this would appear to suggest that where the ultimate of human achievement had failed to bring any worthwhile results, accepting life as coming from 'the hand of God' makes all the difference.

The theme of 'wisdom' is woven into this structure. It is emphasised that the study in 1:12-2:3 of 'all that is done under heaven' is done *in* wisdom - this forming the inclusio to the passage - and the centre of that passage focuses on human wisdom and knowledge. In the description of great deeds in 2:4-10 we are told that throughout חִכְמָה עֲמִידָה לִי (the only use of חִכְמָה in the section). 2:11-19 is basically a study of the advantage of wisdom over folly. And the theme of 'wisdom and knowledge' forms an inclusio to the last section. However, it seems that the value of wisdom is being severely questioned: the middle part of the section from 1:12-2:3 ends with the negative proverb, כִּי בָרַב חִכְמָה רַב-כַּעַס וְיוֹסִיף דַּעַת יוֹסִיף מָכָאֵר; 2:11 makes clear that all the deeds recorded in 2:4-10 were ultimately of no value, even though they were done with wisdom; the advantage of wisdom over folly is shown in 2:11-19 to be nullified by death; and even work done with wisdom and knowledge (picked up from 1:16-18) is shown in 2:20-23 to be ultimately worthless. However, again there is a dramatic change at the end of ch.2 where the gift of God is brought into the equation: in v.26 we are told that God gives 'wisdom and knowledge' to those who please him, and the implication seems to be that this *is* worthwhile even if the 'wisdom and knowledge' which Qohelet sought for, and

<sup>55</sup>De Jong notes 'In their investigation of *'amal*, G.R. Castellino and A.G. Wright overlooked that *'asa* refers to the same matter, namely labour' (1992:112n.1). But see our discussion of these two verbs below.



with which he worked so hard, proved ultimately not to be worthwhile. Moreover, while Qohelet's own exploration of שמחה seemed to be futile, this too may be received as the gift of God.

However, considerable doubt is cast on these conclusions by the final clause of 2:26, גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח. It is not clear what precisely this refers to, whether to the task given to the sinner which is the last thing mentioned, or to the 'wisdom and knowledge and pleasure' given to the 'good' which is the theme of the verse, or to the whole situation described in the final three verses. This ambiguity raises the question whether there is in fact any real advantage in the 'gift of God' or whether the wisdom, knowledge and pleasure given by God also prove ultimately to be futile. Is 2:24 then a positive affirmation at all, or is it a resigned acceptance that this is the best life has to offer? This is a question which is raised throughout Qohelet as we trace the thread of 'call to enjoyment' verses, and as we are presented with Qohelet's observations of 'what is done under the sun', and as we follow his critique of wisdom through the book.

These last five words of ch.2 also serve to disrupt the neat pattern of 1:4-2:26. Had the phrase been simply גם-זה הבל, the following pattern would have been achieved:

A	1:4-11 (101 words)
B	1:12-2:3 (138 words)
C	2:4-10 (94 words)
B'	2:11-19 (138 words)
A'	2:20-26 (101 words)

But the addition of ורעות רוח upsets the balance. This is typical of Qohelet - whenever it seems to be yielding to some overall scheme or pattern something can be found which refuses to fit. We would maintain that the determinate schemata discussed above, and the interpretation given of these, reveal a structure and progression in 1:4-2:26 which explain these two chapters very satisfactorily - at least as well as any other we have read, and better than most. However, the fit is not perfect, and there remain things - especially in 2:20-26 - that we have pushed to the margin which strain against the interpretation given. But this is likely to be true to a greater or lesser extent of any interpretation of any text.

### 3.3 Structures and patterns in the rest of the book

Having outlined such an intricate structure for the section 1:4-2:26, we might expect the rest of the book to yield to similar treatment, but it does not. Despite very careful scrutiny<sup>56</sup> of the remaining ten chapters, including various letter, word and verse counts, and thorough examination of trends in the use of vocabulary, grammatical forms and themes, we are forced to conclude that the book resists any attempt to discover or impose a consistent overall structure. Certain passages do seem to display particular patterns, but there is nothing in the rest of the book which shows the same level of intricate structuring as these first two chapters. As we will discuss later, this seems to be characteristic of Qohelet - the reader is given the hint of a solution (in this case to the structure of the book), but when (s)he tries to apply that to the whole book it is found wanting. This is an important part of the book's ambiguity - not only is meaning difficult to pin down, but throughout the book structure is equally elusive. Nonetheless, there are certain *trends* and patterns that can be discerned which give at least some sense of an overall structure. These help to provide determinate schemata that hold in check the anarchic free play of ambiguity. We will consider these in the next chapter.

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<sup>56</sup>Besides a word by word and letter by letter examination of the MT text of Qohelet, this involved extensive use of the *LBase* computer programme.



## CHAPTER 4, Trends and Patterns in Qohelet

### 4.1 First person terms

Although the book of Qohelet resists any attempt to discover or impose a consistent overall structure, there are a number of trends that can be discerned which give some sense of structure to and development within the book. One of the most important of these concerns the use of first and second person verbs, pronouns and pronominal suffixes. We noted above the great preponderance of first person terms in 1:12-2:26, and this was a key factor in the structure we outlined for chs.1,2. First person verbs continue, although to a lesser and lesser extent, to give a sense of structure in chs.3-10, but nowhere else is there anything like so high a concentration of first person terms as there is in 1:12-2:26. This is an important observation which indicates that after a very heavy emphasis on him- or herself in chs.1,2, the author increasingly turns his/her focus elsewhere. The increase in second person terms later in the book correlates with this observation.

The decreasing use of first person terms is shown on the graphs on the next page:

However, there is a thread of first person verbs which continues until 10:7, after which point they completely disappear. Thus, after a very high concentration of such verbs in the latter part of ch.1 and throughout ch.2, there are no first person verbs at all (and only two first person suffixes) in the last thirty-seven verses of the book<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4.1.1 ראה

Most frequent among the first person verbs is ראה which occurs in the first person at least once, and often several times, in each of the first ten chapters of the book (1:14; 2:12, 13,24; 3:10,16,22; 4:1,4,7,15; 5:12,17; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9,10,17; 9:11,13; 10:5,7). This indicates the importance of the observations that the author makes of 'all that is done under the sun'.

Many of these first person verbs from ראה also seem to form part of the structure of the sections in which they appear, and may help to determine the boundaries of these sections (although, as we have already observed, the boundaries between sections often defy precise definition). 1:14, we noted, is a verse which introduces a number of key words and phrases, including the thread of first person observations. וראיתי and לראות in 2:12,13 are part of the chiasmus stretching from 2:11-19:

ופנית

ופנית

לראות

וראיתי

וידעתי

ואמרתי

ודברתי

ושנאתי

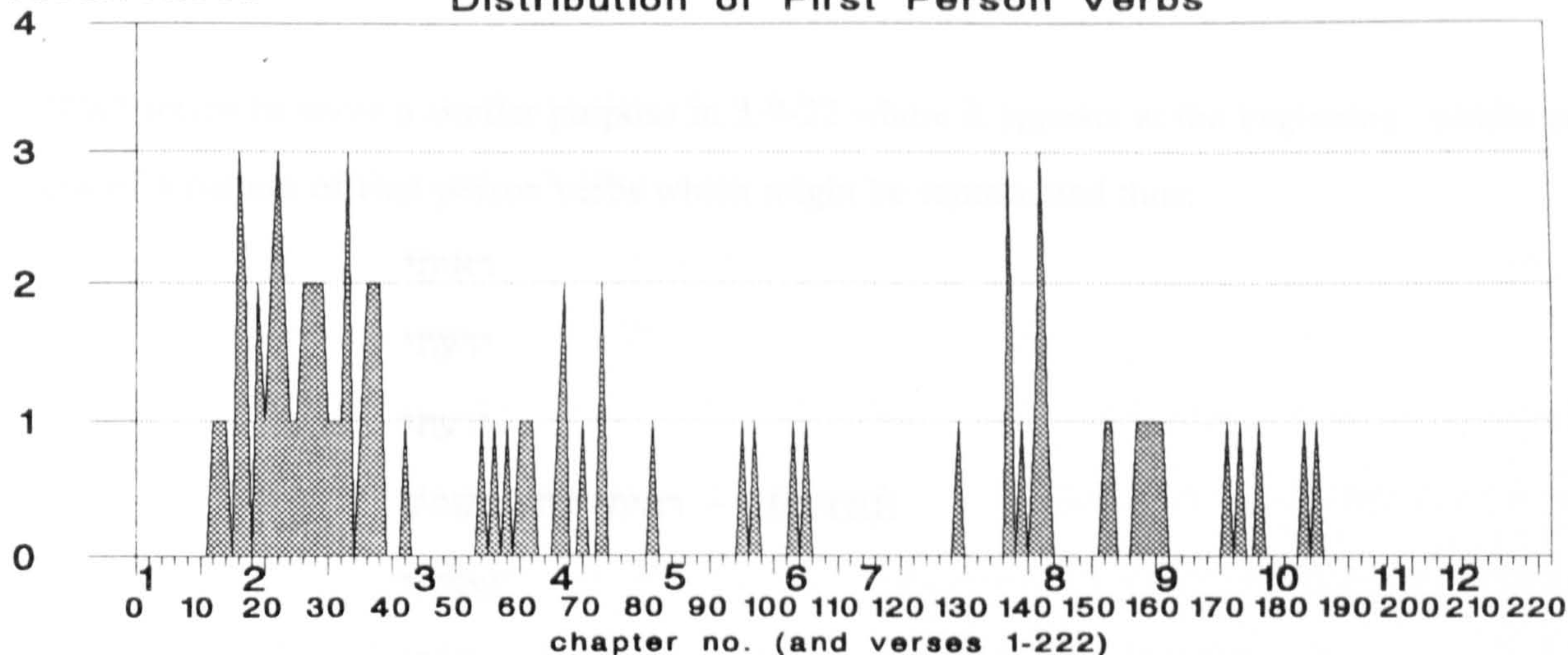
ושנאתי

<sup>1</sup>Exactly one sixth of the book in terms of verses! See Wright's theory, which is based on the numerical value of הבל which is 37. He claims, moreover, that הבל occurs 37 times in the book. It actually occurs 38 times in the MT.



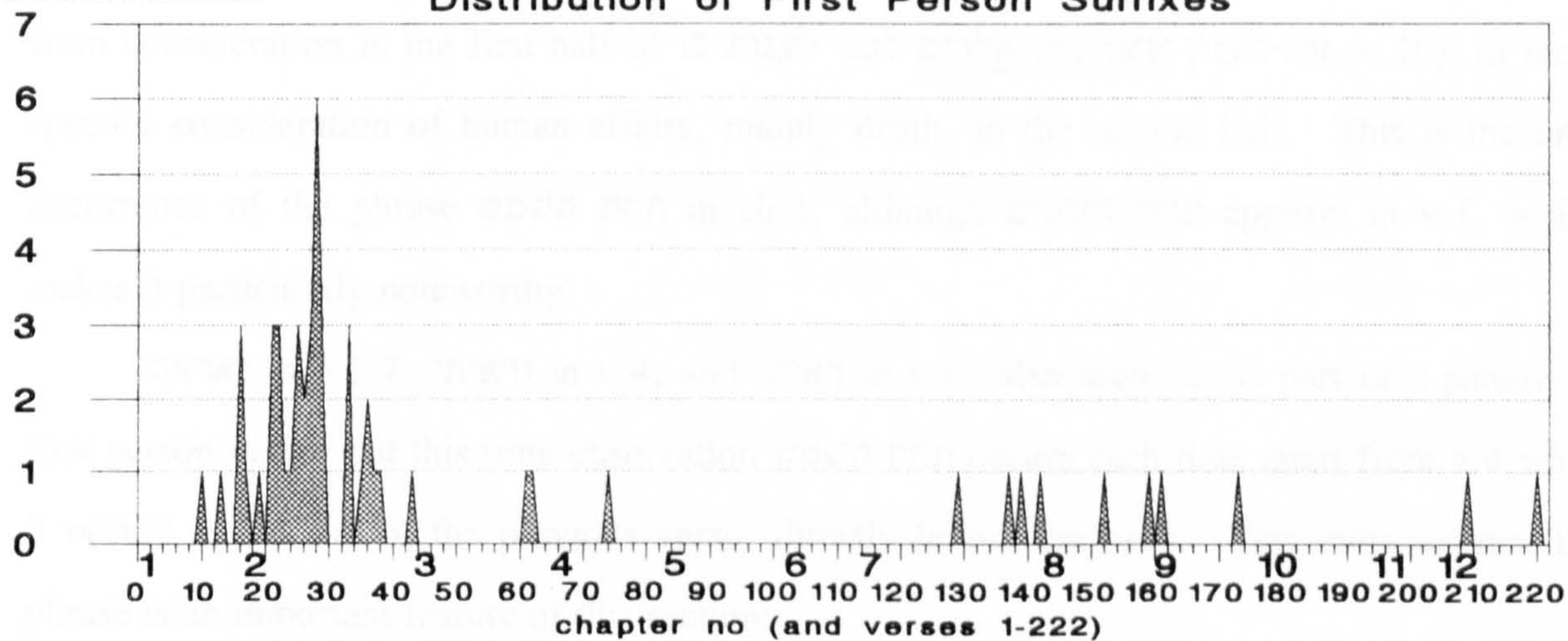
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### Distribution of First Person Verbs



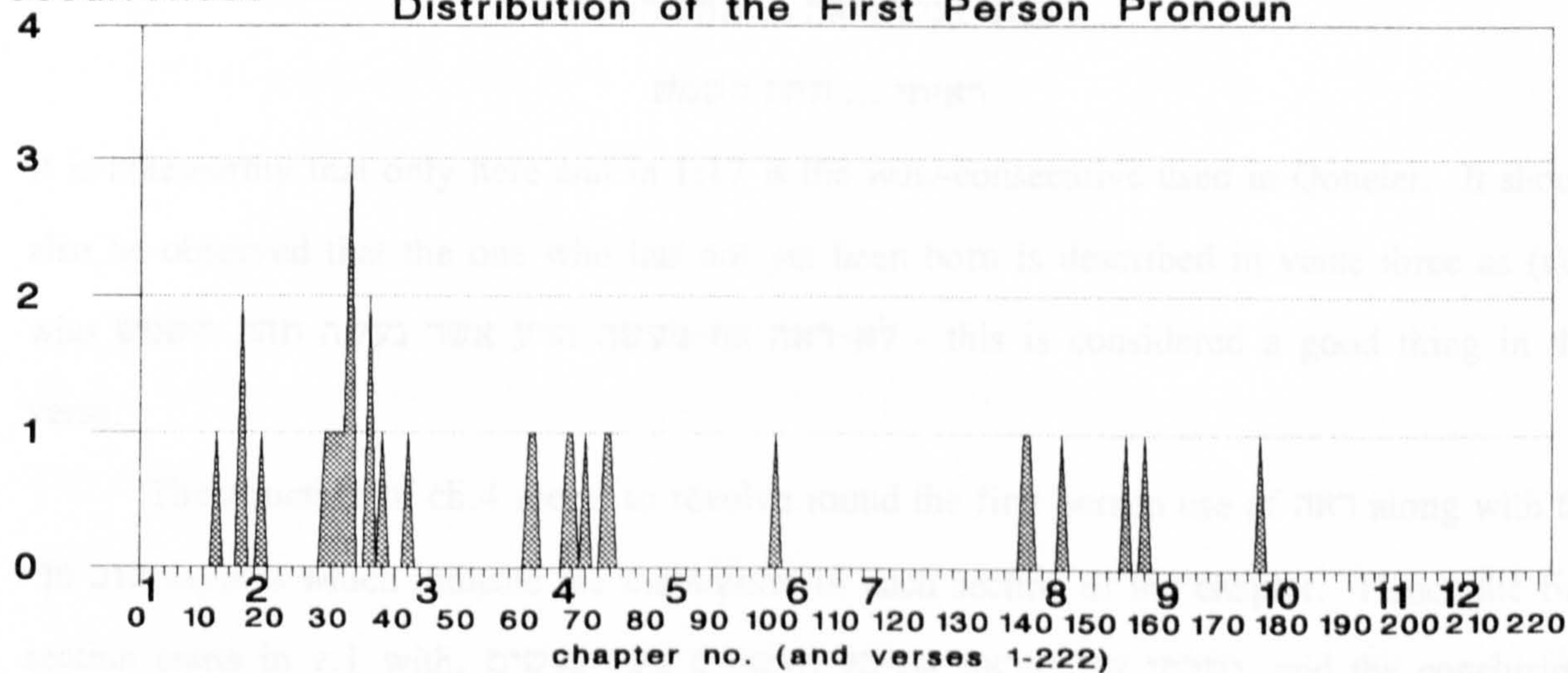
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### Distribution of First Person Suffixes



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occurrences

### Distribution of the First Person Pronoun





ראיתי seems to serve a similar purpose in 3:9-22 where it appears at the beginning, middle and end of a pattern of first person verbs which might be represented thus:

ראיתי

ידעתי

ידעתי

CENTRE - ראיתי תחת השמש

אמרתי

אמרתי

וראיתי

The observation תחת השמש at the centre of this section forms an important turning point - from consideration in the first half of את-הענין אשר נתן אלהים לבני לענות בו (v.10), to more specific consideration of human affairs, mainly death, in the second half. This is the only occurrence of the phrase תחת השמש in ch.3, although תחת השמים appears in v.1, which makes it particularly noteworthy.

וראיתי in 4:1,7, and ראיתי in v.4, also seem to be part of a pattern of first person verbs, but this time observation תחת השמש occurs each time apart from v.4 when it occurs at the end of the previous verse, directly before the verb. This indicates that the phrase is an important feature of this section:

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

(...תחת השמש) וראיתי אני

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

ראיתי ... תחת השמש

It is noteworthy that only here and in 1:17 is the *waw*-consecutive used in Qohelet. It should also be observed that the one who has not yet been born is described in verse three as (s)he who לא-ראה את-מעשה הרע אשר נעשה תחת השמש - this is considered a good thing in this verse.

The structure of ch.4 seems to revolve round the first person use of ראה along with the טוב מן- sayings which indicate the main point of each section of the chapter. Hence the first section starts in v.1 with, ושבתי אני ואראה את-כל-העשקים אשר נעשים, and the conclusion,



וטוב משניהם את אשר-עדן לא היה אשר לא-ראה את-העשה הרע אשר נעשה תחת השמש appears in v.3. The next section then commences with the words וראיתי אני את-כל-עמל in v.4, and concludes with the proverb in v.6, טוב מלא כף נחת ממלא חפנים עמל. The final two sections are both fifty-two words long. The first of these begins, ושבתי אני ואראה הבל תחת השמש (v.7), and this time has the טוב מן-האחד saying, טובים השנים מן-האחד, at the centre of the section (v.9). In the last part this pattern is reversed, because the section starts with the 'better than' saying טוב ילד מסכן וחכם ממלך זקן וכסיל, and has the clause containing the verb ראיתי, in the centre: ראיתי את-כל-ההיים (v.15). This gives a structure for the chapter like this:

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

טוב ... מ-

(...תחת השמש:) וראיתי אני

טוב ... מ-

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

טובים ... מן-

טוב ... מ-

ראיתי ... תחת השמש

The reversal of the pattern in the final part may be a means of indicating that this is the end of the section.

There is also a pattern of first person verbs from the root ראה in 5:12,17 and 6:1 where a central section describing what is 'good' (using one of the 'call to enjoyment' verses) is placed between two sections describing bad things that have been observed. Again the phrase תחת השמש plays an important part:

יש רעה הולה ראיתי תחת השמש

הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב ... תחת השמש

יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש

As we shall note later, it is not clear where the beginning and end of this section are: does it start at 5:12, or at v.9, or at v.7; and does it end at 6:6 or, perhaps, at 6:9? The distribution of the verb ראה, or of any other first person verb, is of relatively little help in this instance.

ראיתי in 7:15 is the only first person verb in the first twenty-two verses of the chapter. 7:1-8 appears to be a self-contained unit (which is demarcated by the inclusio of two carefully

balanced proverb-like sayings in each of vv.1 and 8) of 'better-than' sayings. The phrase in v.15a, **את-הכל ראיתי בימי הבלי**, then seems to refer both backwards and forwards to link the two sections 7:9-14 (on the relative value of wisdom) and 7:15b-22 (which studies the value of wisdom and righteousness compared with folly and wickedness/sin). Vv.23,24 may also refer both backwards and forwards linking 7:15b-22 and 7:25-29 (which focuses on what can be 'found out' using wisdom).

From this point first person use of the verb **ראה** features less often, and plays less of a role in the structure of the sections in which it does occur, although **יש רעה ראיתי תחת השמש** in 10:5, and **גם-זה ראיתי** in 9:13 may both start sections which refer back to the phrase with which 9:11-12 starts, **שבתי וראה תחת השמש**: 10:5-7 and 9:13-16 both relate observations which confirm the implication of 9:11-12 that actions do not always result in the expected or appropriate conclusion. The final occurrence of **ראיתי** is in 10:7 where it may indicate the end of the short section 10:5-7.

#### 4.1.2 אמר/דבר

First person verbs from the roots **אמר** and **דבר** form a second thread, through most of the first nine chapters (1:16; 2:1,2,15,15; 3:17,18; 6:3; 7:23; 8:14; 9:16). **ואמרתי** and **ודברתי** in 2:15 form part of the chiasmus of 2:11-19:

ופניתי

ופניתי

לראות

וראיתי

וידעתי

אמרתי

דברתי

ושנאתי

ושנאתי

The two occurrences of **אמרתי** in 3:17,18 form part of the pattern in the latter part of ch.3 (3:10-22):



ראיתי

ידעתי

ידעתי

ראיתי

אמרתי

אמרתי

וראיתי

The remaining occurrences seem simply to be personal comments on observations just described, and do not display any apparent pattern.

#### 4.1.3 ידע

Only four times does Qohelet claim (s)he 'knew', using the perfect form of the verb ידע, and these are all in chs.1-3. In 1:17 (s)he says, ידעתי שגם-זה הוא רעיון רוח. Then the claim to know that 'one fate befalls both/all' (2:14) is the centre of the chiasmus in 2:11-19:

ופניתי

ופניתי

לראות

וראיתי

וידעתי

ואמרתי

ודברתי

ושנאתי

ושנאתי

And the knowledge of what is good for/in people (v.12), and the knowledge that God's deeds endure forever (v.14), are part of the pattern in 3:10-22:

ראיתי

ידעתי

ידעתי

ראיתי

אמרתי

אמרתי

וראיתי

On one further occasion (s)he claims to 'know', this time using the participle rather than a perfect verb, when (s)he says in 8:12, יודע אני אשר יהיה-טוב ליראי האלהים אשר ייראו מלפניו.

However, the root ידע is important in Qohelet and it occurs with greater frequency in the second half of the book where in the majority of cases it is preceded by לא, אין, or מי<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly noticeable in chs.8-11 where it takes one of these three adverbs in 8:1,5,7; 9:1,5,10,11,12; 10:14,15; 11:2,5,5,6. It seems clear, then, that what is *not* known is at least as important as what *is* known in the later chapters, and this may explain Qohelet's reticence to claim ידעתי in the earlier chapters. It also makes the things he does claim to know even more striking: that the search for wisdom, knowledge, madness and folly is [like] 'chasing wind'; that one fate comes to all (or to *both* the wise and the foolish); that there is nothing good for (or *in*) people except that they eat and do (or *experience?*) good in their lives; that God's deeds endure forever; and that it will be well with those who fear God. It may be, as we will see later, that phrases concerned with 'not knowing' help to delineate the structure of the second half of the book, and certainly the discussion of 'knowledge' shows the development from first person at the beginning of the book, to a mixture of first, second and third in the middle, to a concentration on second person at the end, which we will now demonstrate to be a feature of this book.

<sup>2</sup>The root ידע appears 16 times (36.4%) before 6:9 (1:16,17,17,17,18; 2:14,19,21,26; 3:12,14,21; 4:13,17; 6:5,8), and 28 times (63.6%) from 6:10-12:14. Of these 28, 15 are preceded by לא, אין or מי (6:12; 8:1,5,7; 9:1,5, 10,11,12; 10:14,15; 11:2,5,5,6; the remaining occurrences are found in 6:10; 7:12,22,25,25; 8:5,12,16,17; 9:5; 10:20; 11:9; 12:9).

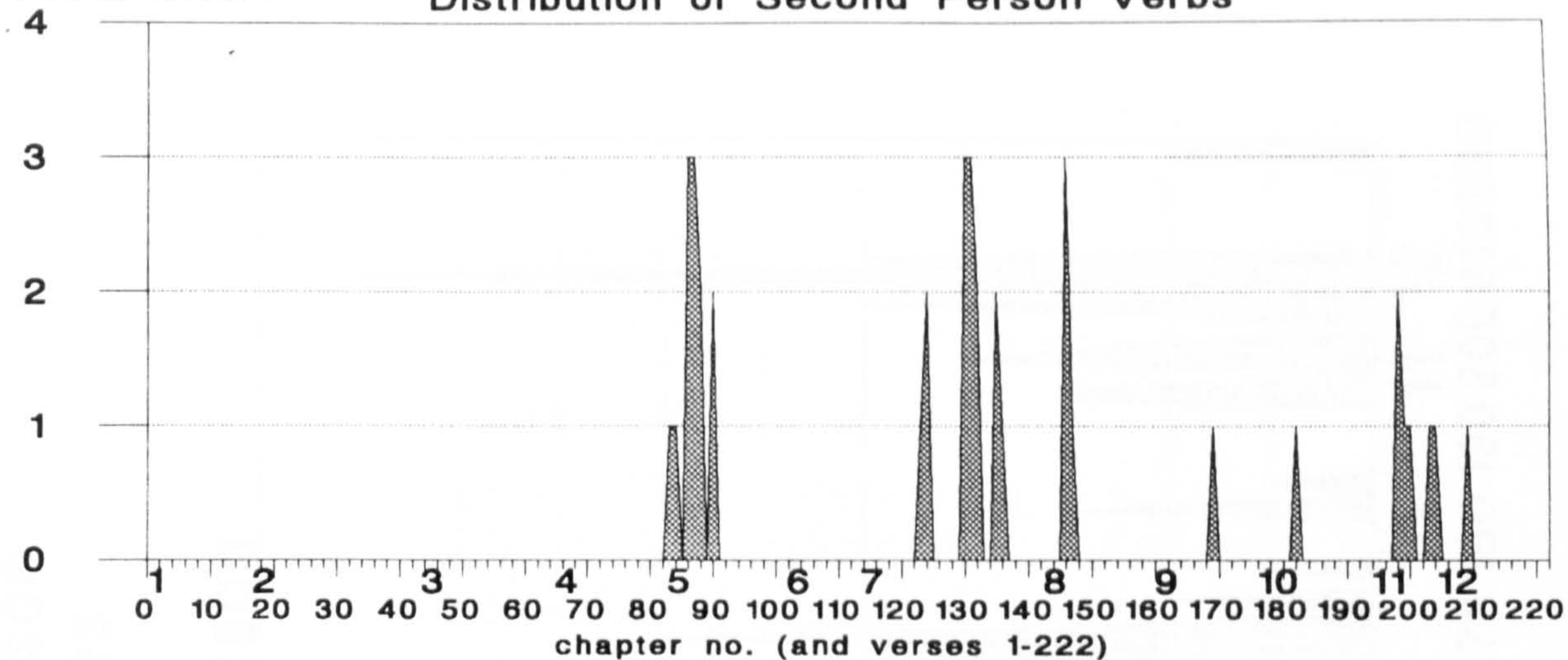


## 4.2 Second person terms

Where first person terms appear in abundance at the beginning of Qohelet, second person terms appear more often later in the book. Apart from imperatives in 1:10 (which is not addressed directly to the reader) and 2:1, and one second person suffix in 2:1 (and both second person terms in 2:1 are addressed to the author him- or herself and not to the reader), the second person is not used until 4:17. It is then used considerably more often in the second half of the book, particularly at the end of ch.10 and in ch.11 once first person terms have all but petered out. Moreover, while few second person terms are used in ch.12, most of the chapter is cast in the second person by the use of the imperatives in vv.1,12,13. The graphs on the following pages show the distribution of second person terms.

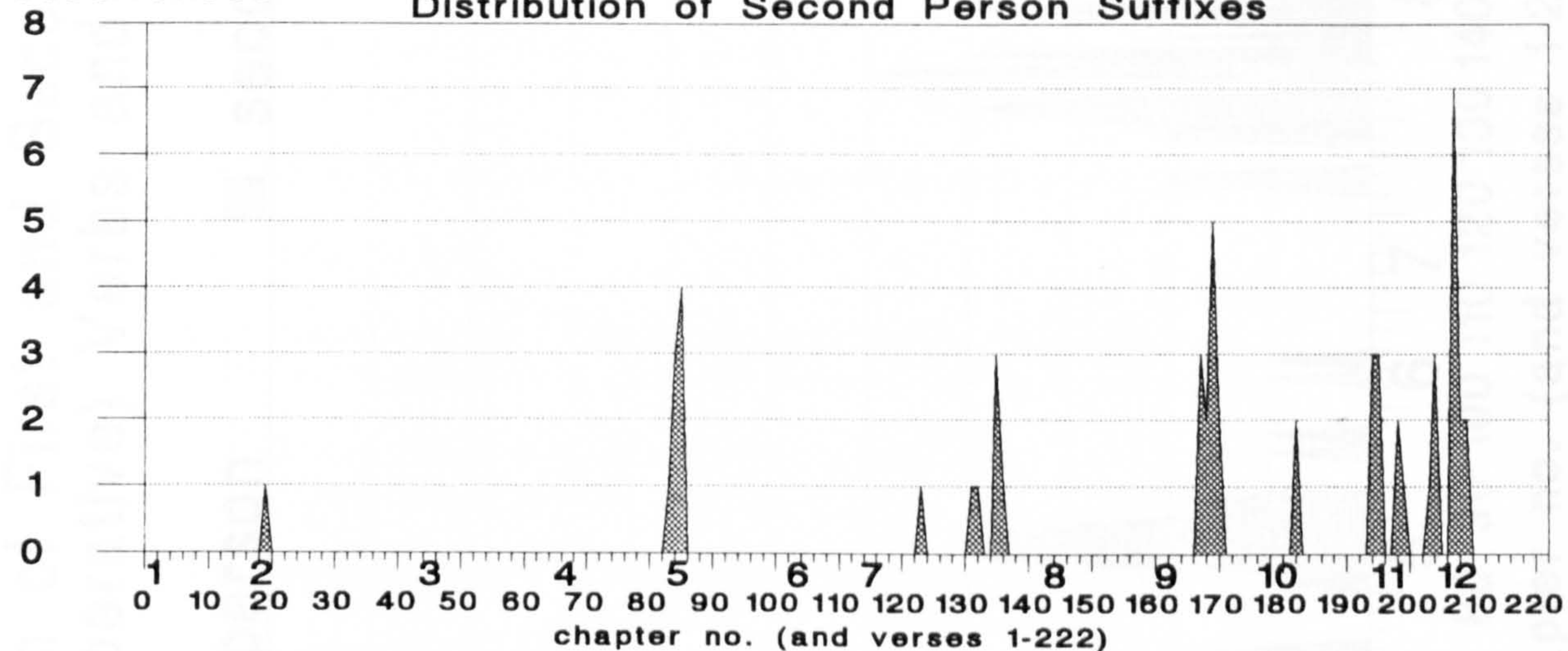
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### Distribution of Second Person Verbs



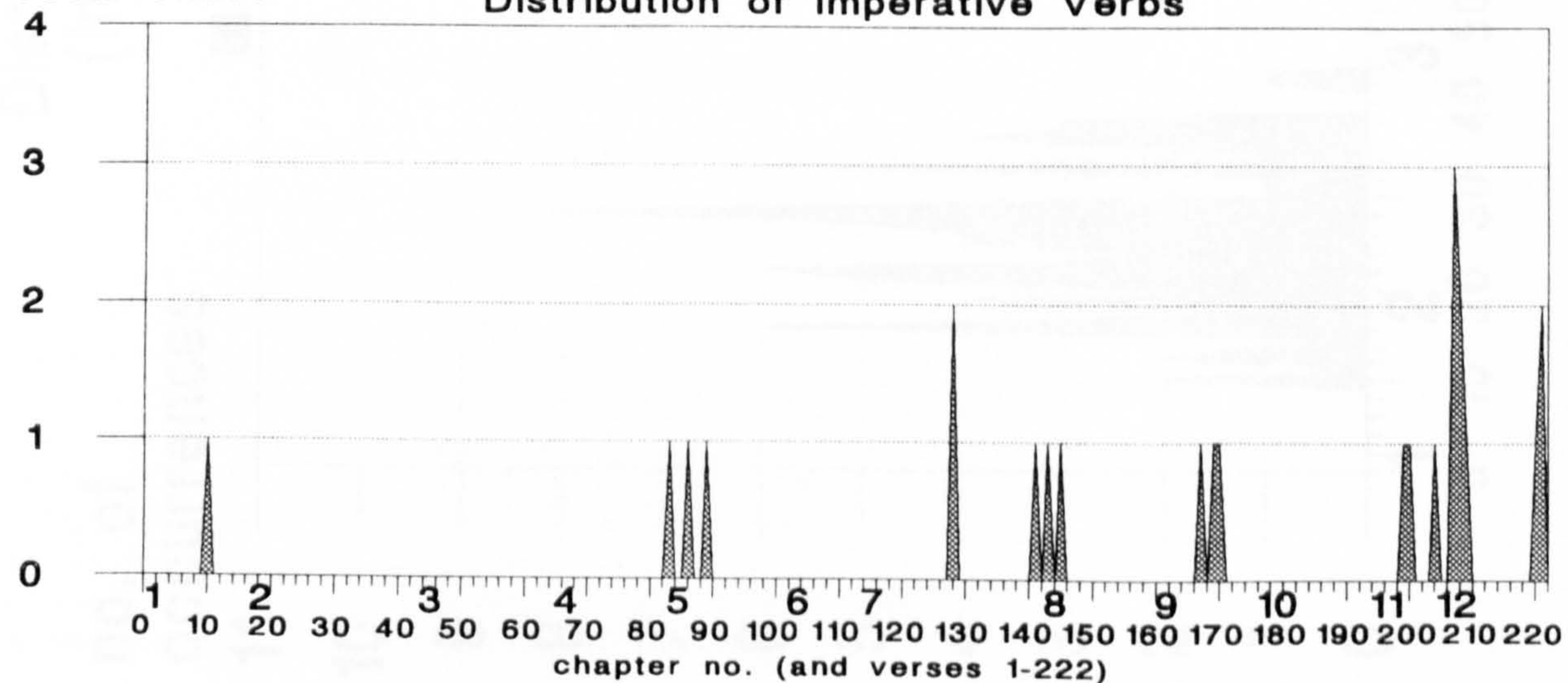
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### Distribution of Second Person Suffixes



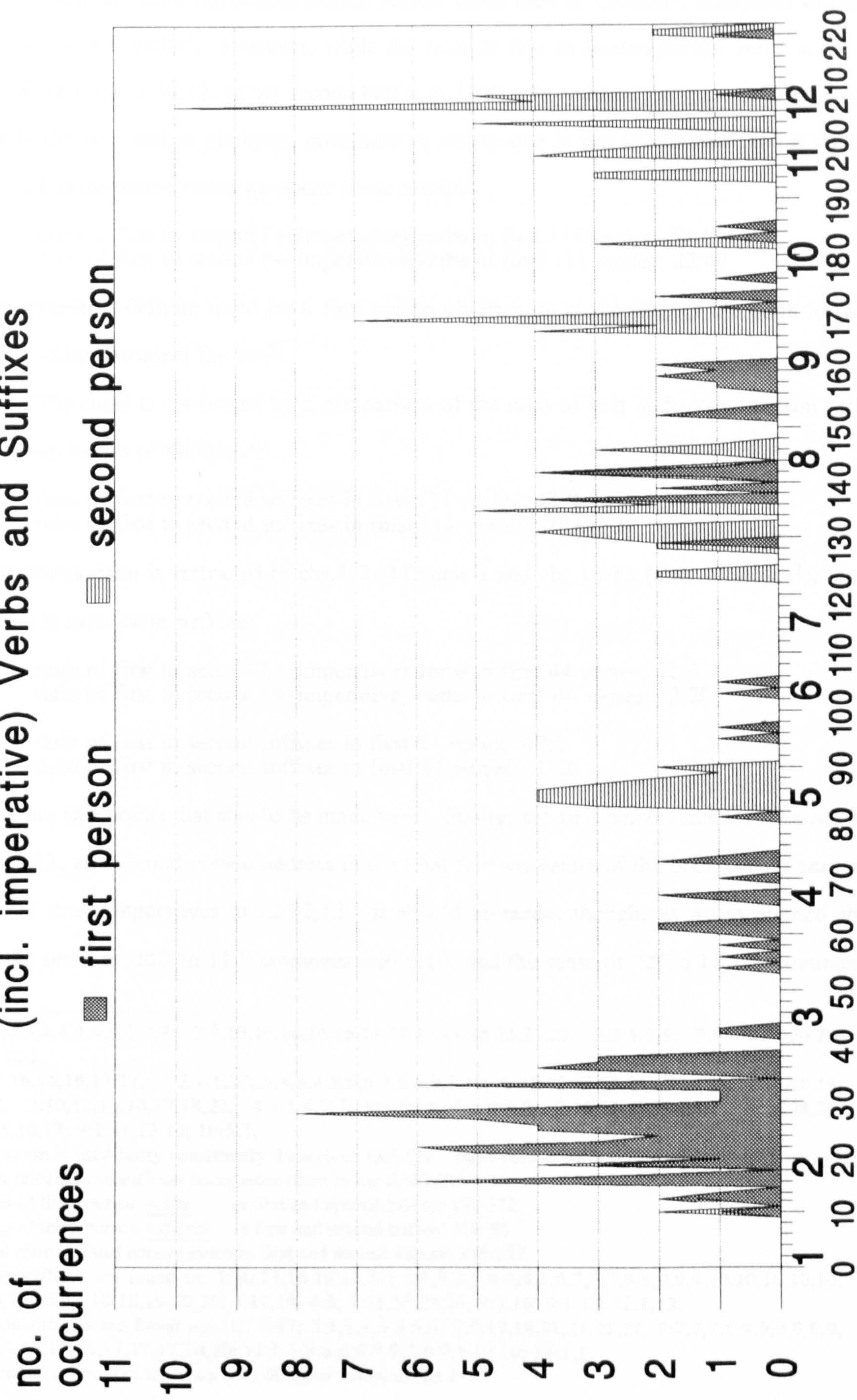
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### Distribution of Imperative Verbs





# Distribution of First and Second Person (incl. imperative) Verbs and Suffixes



chapter no. (and verses 1-222)



There are only thirty-nine second person verbs used in Qohelet<sup>3</sup>, compared to eighty-one first person verbs<sup>4</sup>. However, while the ratio of first to second person verbs in the first half of the book is 59:12, in the second half it is 22:27. In addition there are only six imperatives in the first half of the book, compared to twenty-two in the second half, and if these are included in the above ratios we obtain these results:

ratio of first to second (+ imperative) verbs in first 111 verses: 59:18  
ratio of first to second (+ imperative) verbs in final 111 verses: 22:47

This suggests a definite trend from first person observation at the start of the book to second person address towards the end<sup>5</sup>.

The trend is confirmed by a comparison of the ratio of first and second person suffixes in the two halves of the book<sup>6</sup>:

ratio of first to second suffixes in first 111 verses: 43:9  
ratio of first to second suffixes in final 111 verses: 10:45

If the comparison is restricted to chs.1,2 (44 verses) and chs.10-12 (also 44 verses<sup>7</sup>), the difference is even more striking:

ratio of first to second (+ imperative) verbs in first 44 verses: 42:3  
ratio of first to second (+ imperative) verbs in final 44 verses: 2:20

ratio of first to second suffixes in first 44 verses: 40:2  
ratio of first to second suffixes in final 44 verses: 1:26

There are two points that should be made here. Firstly, the first person address does not begin until 1:12, and second person address in the final thirteen verses of the book occurs only in the form of three imperatives in 12:12,13. It should be noted, though, as we mentioned above, that the sense of שמה in 11:9 continues into v.10, and the sense of זכר in 12:1 is continued by

<sup>3</sup>4:17; 5:1,3,3,3,4,4,4,5,5,7,7; 7:9,10,10,16,16,16,17,17,17,18,18,21,21,22; 8:3,3,3,4; 9:9; 10:4,20,20; 11:1,2,5,6; 12:1.

<sup>4</sup>1:12,13,14,16,16,16,17,17; 2:1,1,2,3,3,4,4,4,5,5,6,7,8,8,9,9,10,10,11,11,12,13,14,15,15,15,17,18,18,19,19,20,20,24; 3:10,12,14,16,17,18,22; 4:1,1,4,7,7,15; 5:12,17; 6:1,3; 7:15,23,23,23,25,27,28,28,28,29; 8:9,10,14,15,16,17; 9:1,11,13,16; 10:5,7.

<sup>5</sup>The third person is used fairly consistently throughout Qohelet. Third person verbs occur more often in the second half, but third person suffixes occur more often in the first half:

ratio of third person verbs in first and second halves: 139:172

ratio of third person suffixes in first and second halves: 106:85

total ratio of third person terms in first and second halves: 245:257

<sup>6</sup>First person suffixes are found in: 1:10,13,16,16,16,17; 2:1,3,3,3,4,4,4,5,6,7,7,7,8,8,9,9,9,10,10,10,10,10,10,11,11,15,15,15,17,18,18,19,20,25; 3:17,18; 4:8; 7:15,23,25,28; 8:9,16; 9:1,13; 12:1,12.

Second person suffixes are found in: 2:1; 4:17; 5:1,1,1,5,5,5,5; 7:9,17,18,21,21,21,22; 9:7,7,7,8,8,9,9,9,9,9,10,10; 10:4,4,16,16,16,17,17,17,20,20; 11:1,5,6,6,6,9,9,9,9,9,9,10,10; 12:1,1.

<sup>7</sup>Same number of verses, but there are over 60 more words in chs.1-2.



-לֹא in 12:1,2,6. Also the three imperatives in 12:12,13 mean that the end of the book addresses the reader directly. However, the most intensively first person section is from 1:12-2:26 (33 verses, 471 words), while the most intensively second person section is from 10:16-12:1 (less than half the length with 16 verses, 218 words). Secondly, the section from 4:17-5:6 contains many second person and imperative verbs and second person suffixes even though it is in the first half of the book, while the section from 7:23-29 contains many first person verbs and suffixes although it is in the second half of the book. There is, then, a degree of inter-mingling between first and second person sections in the book rather than a smooth transition from one to the other. This type of 'inter-mingling' is a characteristic feature of Qohelet. Nonetheless, a general *trend* from first person to second person is evident. This trend may suggest a development in the book from a greater concentration on the author's own observation of the things that happen 'under the sun' in the earlier chapters, to a greater concentration on exhortation directed at the reader in the later chapters.

We do not find threads of second person verbs similar to the first person terms we considered above. The closest is the imperative הֲלֹא which is found in 1:10; 2:1; 7:14,27,29 and 9:9. However, even this word seems to bear a different meaning in 2:1 and 9:9. We have, though, noted a number of words which occur in the first person early in the book and in the second person towards the end, and this accords with the development we have just outlined from the description of personal observations to the issuing of exhortations directed towards the reader. The second person form of the verbs in Qohelet is used mostly to issue negative instructions: twenty-five<sup>8</sup> out of thirty-nine second person verbs are preceded by לֹא/לֹא. Positive instructions are issued in the form of imperatives, of which there are a similar number - twenty-eight<sup>9</sup>.

### 4.3 Trends in key words and phrases

Besides the trend from first person to second person in Qohelet, we can also discern trends in the themes and key words used in the book. Words and phrases from the key ques-

<sup>8</sup>5:1,3,4,4,5,5,7; 7:9,10,10,16,16,17,17,18,21,21; 8:3,3; 10:4,20,20; 11:2,5,6.

<sup>9</sup>1:10; 2:1,1; 4:17; 5:3,6; 7:14,14,27,29; 8:2; 9:7,7,7,9,10; 11:1,2,6,9,9,9,10,10; 12:1,12,13,13.

tion in 1:3, **מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש**, occur for a final time in ch.10: **תחת השמש** appears for the last time in 10:5; the final occurrence of **יתרון** is in 10:11; and **עמל** makes its last appearance in 10:15. We can also observe that the ratio of occurrences in the first half of the book to occurrences in the second half of **מה-יתרון** is 4:1; of **כל** is 54:37; of **עמל** is 30:5; and of **תחת השמש** is 20:12. Also the key word from 1:2, **הבל**, occurs in a ratio of 24:14<sup>10</sup>. Another important root in the first half of the book is **ענה** which occurs in a ratio of 11:2, and the phrase **רעות/רעיון רוח** is to be found only in the first half (9 times), the last of these being in the final verse of the half, 6:9.

Whether or not there is a clear thematic division between 6:9 and 10, the divide is useful for comparing the two halves of the book so as to discern certain trends. Wright's theory builds on the claim that the 222 verses of Qohelet divide into two halves of 111 (3 x 37!) verses each, the first of which deals with 'Qoheleth's Investigation of Life', and the second with 'Qoheleth's Conclusions'. We have argued that there is no clear break between the halves, and that Qohelet's investigations go beyond 6:9. Nonetheless, trends can be discerned which accord to some extent with Wright's description of the two halves of the book, and it should be noted that in the BHS Qohelet contains 2987 words (counting all words which appear separately or connected to another by a *maqṣep*, but not those prepositions or the definite article which are joined to a word directly) of which 1496 are in 1:1 to 6:9 and 1491 in 6:12-12:14. This means that, according to the BHS text, the middle word of the book is in 6:9. In fact, highly appropriately in light of the inclusio in 1:2 and 12:8, the word which lies precisely at the centre is **הבל**, and it is used in the phrase **גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח** before which there are 1491 words, and after which there are 1491. Of course, while this may be useful in indicating *approximately* where the centre of the book is, it seems rather unlikely that there

<sup>10</sup>There is a very high concentration of these words in chs.1-2. In these 44 verses (19.8% of the total number of verses) we find 5 of the 18 words from the root **יתר** (27.8%); 26 of the 91 occurrences of **כל** (28.6%), 17 of the 35 occurrences of **עמל** (48.6%), 11 of the 32 occurrences of **תחת השמש/השמים** (34.4%), and 14 of the 38 occurrences of **הבל** (36.8%). Also 5 of the 9 occurrences of **רעות/רעיון רוח** (55.5%) are in these two chapters; 17 of the 64 words from the root **עשה** (26.6%); 4 of the 13 words from the root **ענה** (30.8%); 9 of the 32 words from the roots **סכל/כסל** (28.1%); 17 of the 53 words from the root **חכם** (32.1%); 16 of the 47 words from the root **היה** (34.0%); 25 of the 41 occurrences of **אני** (60.1%); 5 of the 17 words from the root **שמה** (29.4%); and 4 of the 10 words from the root **קרה** (40.0%). It is noteworthy, however, that of the 40 occurrences of **אלהים** in Qohelet, only 3 (7.5%) are found in chs.1,2. We might also note that of the 65 occurrences of the short form of the relative particle **אשר**, **-ש**, 32 (49.2%) are in these two chapters. By contrast, the full form is used only 7 times out of a total of 89 (7.9%).



will be no errors in the text which have a bearing on its precise location. The reader must judge for her- or himself the significance of the centre in terms of both verses and words occurring at the same place - after all, how many readers take the time to count the number of words in the books they read? The Massoretes, however, seemed to pay considerably more attention than modern readers to the number of words as a way of safeguarding the sacred scripture as it was copied. We might also recall that **גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח** occurs at the end of 2:26, which we argued above is the end of a major section of the book. It occurs only once more, in 4:4, and a very similar phrase, **גם-זה הבל ורעיון רוח**, occurs in 4:16: neither of these seem to have any bearing on the overall structure of Qohelet.

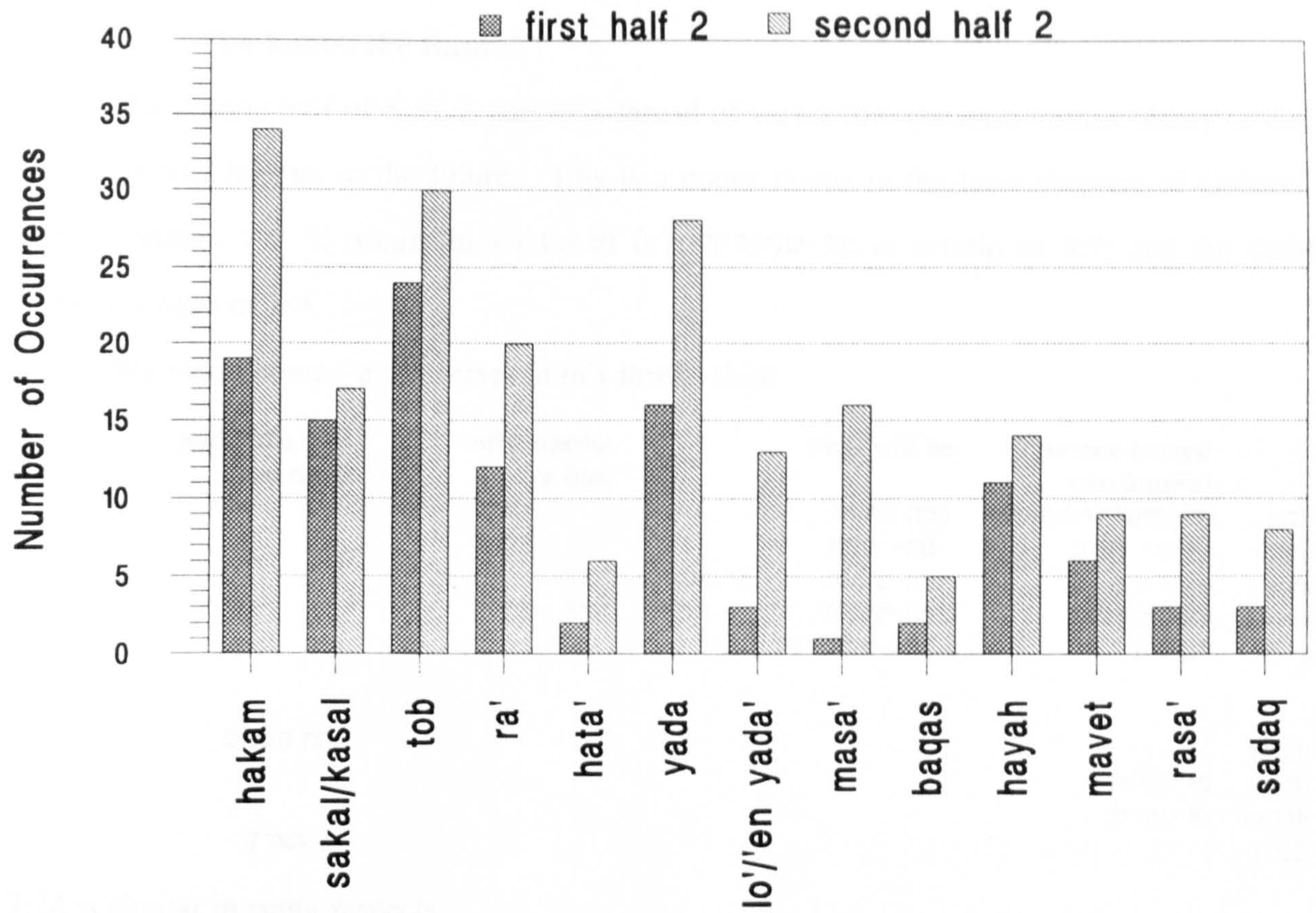
In light of the above, we might take 6:12

**כי מי-יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי-חיי הבלו ויעשם כצל אשר מי-יגיד לאדם מה-יהיה אחריו תחת השמש**

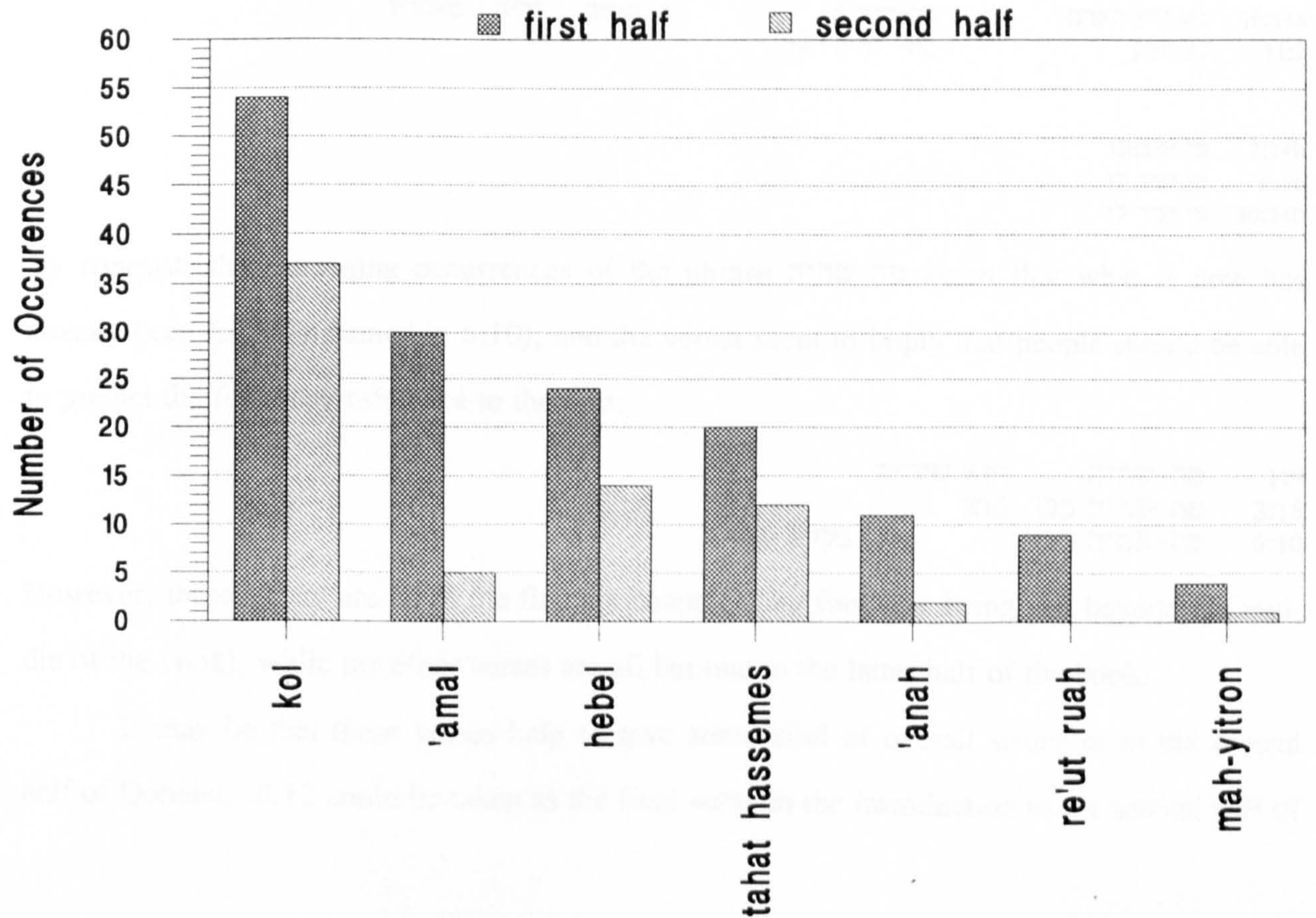
as introducing some key themes of the second half, in the same way that 1:3 introduced key themes of the first half. Taking the first part of the verse first, we find that the ratio between first and second half occurrences of the root **ידע** is 16:28; of **טוב** is 24:30; of **חיה** is 11:14; and of **יום** is 7:19. Correspondingly, the ratio of **לא/אין ידע** is 3:13; of **רע** is 12:20 and of **חטא** is 2:6; of **מות** is 6:9; but of **לילה** is 1:1. Other important words which occur more often in the second half of Qohelet are **צדק** (3:8) and **רשע** (3:9); **חכם** (19:34) and **כסל/סכל** (15:17); and **בקש** (2:5) and **מצא** (1:16). These statistics are shown using graphs on the next page, from which it may be concluded that there is a *trend* from personal observation or investigation of the world 'under the sun', with all its pleasures and problems, in the first half of Qohelet, to considerations of a more philosophical and moralistic nature involving discussion of such things as what is and is not known, good and evil, life and death, wisdom and folly, etc., in the second half. However, the themes of the second half are all introduced in the earlier chapters, and observation and investigation continues until ch.10.



## Words Occurring more often in the Second Half



## Words Occurring more often in the First Half





4.3.1 ‘Who knows the future?’

The second half of 6:12 is part of a thread of verses that question human ability to discern what will happen in the future. This is a major theme in the later chapters of Qohelet. The expression מי יגיד occurs in a ratio of 0:2; מה-ש(י)היה in a ratio of 3:7; and the word אחריו in a ratio of 1:4.

We might compare the verses in this thread thus:

under the sun/ on earth	afterwards/ after him	what will be	no-one knows/ who knows?	
	אחריו	במה שיהיה	מי יביאנו לראות	3:22
	אחריו	מה- יהיה	מי יגיד לאדם	6:12a
	יהיה	כי כאשר	איננו ידע	8:7a
	יהיה מאחריו	ואשר	לא-ידע האדם	10:14a
		מה- יהיה רעה	לא תדע	11:2a
תחת השמש				6:12b
			מי יגיד לו	8:7b
על-הארץ			מי יגיד לו	10:14b
				11:2b

7:24 is similar in some respects:

אחריו		במה שיהיה	מי יביאנו לראות	3:22
אחריו		מה- יהיה	מי יגיד לאדם	6:12
		מה- שיהיה ועמק עמק		7:24a
	יהיה	כי כאשר	איננו ידע	8:7a
מאחריו	יהיה	ואשר	לא-ידע האדם	10:14a
		מה- יהיה רעה	לא תדע	11:2
			מי ימצאנו	7:24b
			מי יגיד לו	8:7b
			מי יגיד לו	10:14b

By contrast, the remaining occurrences of the phrase מה-שהיה assert that what is now has already been (or been named in 6:10), and the verses seem to imply that people should be able to predict the future by reference to the past:

הוא שיהיה	מה-שהיה	1:9
הוא	מה-שהיה כבר	3:15
נקרא שמו	מה-שהיה כבר	6:10

However, these verses are all in the first six chapters (the final one being just beyond the middle of the book), while the other verses are all but one in the latter half of the book.

It may be that these verses help to give some kind of overall structure to the second half of Qohelet. 6:12 could be taken as the final verse in the introduction to the second half of

the book. 8:7 comes towards the end of the next section (extending from 7:1-8:8) which focuses generally on 'what is good/better'. This is followed by a passage which concentrates on human deeds and death (8:9-9:10). None of the verses we examined above occurs in this section, but 8:17, which lies near the centre of the section, affirms unequivocally, by the use three times of the expression **לֹא מֵצָא**, that there are things people cannot know. 10:14 then appears towards the end of the next section (extending from 9:11-11:6) which focuses on wisdom, folly and knowledge. The final verse in the thread, 11:2, is in the second person, which accords with a trend we noted above. It is found in a short passage, 11:1-6, which concludes the section from 9:11-11:6 and concentrates particularly on what is 'not known'. The passage thus seems to form the climax to this particular thread of verses.

#### 4.3.2 'Call to enjoyment'

While the verses denying human knowledge of the future occur more often in the second half of the book, the verses issuing the 'call to enjoyment' occur more often in the first half of the book. Like the former thread this one also consists of five very similar verses:

		בָּאֲדָם	אֵין-טוֹב	2:24a
כִּי אִם- לְשִׁמּוֹחַ		בָּם	אֵין טוֹב	3:12a
יִשְׂמַח	מֵאֲשֶׁר		אֵין טוֹב	3:22a
	אֲשֶׁר-יִפֶּה		אֲנִי טוֹב	5:17a
תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כִּי אִם-		לָאָדָם	אֵין-טוֹב	8:15b
	ב- עֲמָלוֹ	טוֹב	שִׂיאֲכֹל וְשִׁתָּה וְהִרְאָה אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ	2:24b
	בְּכָל-עֲמָלוֹ	טוֹב	שִׂיאֲכֹל וְשִׁתָּה וְרָאָה	3:13a
	בְּכָל-עֲמָלוֹ	טוֹבָה	לֹא-כֹל וְלֹא-שִׁתּוֹת וְלֹא-רְאוֹת	5:17b
	ב- עֲמָלוֹ	וְלִשְׂמֹחַ וְהוּא יִלְוֶנּוּ	לֹא-כֹל וְלֹא-שִׁתּוֹת	8:15c
		בְּחַיּוֹ	וְלַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹב	3:12b
			הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׁיו	3:22b
	חַיּוֹ	תַּחַת-הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ מִסְפֵּר יָמָיו	שִׂיעֲמַל	5:17c
	חַיּוֹ	יָמָיו		8:15d
		הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא	גַּם-זֶה רָאִיתִי אֲנִי כִי מִיָּד	2:24c
		אֱלֹהִים הִיא	מֵתָה	3:13b
	כִּי-הוּא חִלְקוֹ...			3:22c
	כִּי-הוּא חִלְקוֹ		אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים	5:17d
תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ			אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים	8:15e

What is 'good' is the main element that is common to all the verses, then all the verses apart from 3:22 refer to eating and drinking and enjoying work, and note that these things are given



by God. The root שמה is used on three occasions, as is reference to 'his life'. The expression 'under the sun', perhaps surprisingly, is found only in the last two verses: once in 5:17 and twice in 8:15. 9:7-9 and 11:9-10 continue the sentiments found here, although they do not follow the same pattern as these verses. They are presented in the second person rather than the third person, and thus fit the trend we have discerned elsewhere from observation to instruction.

It may be that these verses help to give some kind of structure to the first half of the book. We have already noted that 2:24 occurs towards the end of a major section of Qohelet from 1:4-2:26. If ch.3 is regarded as the next section, then it too ends with one of these verses, 3:22, and has another at its centre, 3:12,13. This section follows similar themes to 8:9-9:10 which closes with verses in the second person that express similar sentiments to the 'call to enjoyment' verses. 5:17 may then occur at the centre of a section (extending from 5:7 or 5:9 to 6:6 or 6:9) which examines the theme of 'wealth'. However, this leaves the verses from 4:1 to 5:6 with no verse issuing the 'call to enjoyment' anywhere in the section. Perhaps this is because the structure to this section builds on the expression טוב מן- which picks up a key element of the 'call'. This would give the following divisions for 1:1-6:9:

**introduction (1:1-3)**

<b>section centring on catalogue of Qohelet's deeds (1:4-2:26)</b>	596 words
with a 'call to enjoyment' towards the end	
<b>section comparing human deeds and God's deeds (3:1-22)</b>	323 words
with a 'call to enjoyment' towards the end and at the centre	596 words
<b>section considering what is good/better</b>	273 words
<b>section focusing on wealth</b>	299 words
with a 'call to enjoyment' at the centre	

When set out like this, it is clear that 1:4-2:26 is exactly the same length as 3:1-5:6, while 5:7-6:9 (apart the final clause) is approximately half this length. There is one more verse in 3:1-6:9 (45, that is 22 in ch.3 and 23 in 4:1-5:6) than 1:3-2:26 (44), while 5:7-6:9 has half the number of verses (22). This gives a neat pattern to the first half of the book, and provides useful thematic divisions, but it is not proposed as *the* definitive structure because another reader emphasising different aspects of the book might come to quite different conclusions (as, indeed, other readers do). It must be constantly borne in mind that the large number of repeated phrases in the book tantalise the reader to look for a pattern, but lend themselves to being structured in various different ways.

### 4.3.3 עשה/עמל

We suggested previously that עמל and עשה may be used synonymously in the early chapters of Qohelet. However, it should be noted that while עמל occurs considerably more often in the first half of the book (in fact thirty times in the first half, compared to just five times in the second half), עשה appears the same number of times (thirty-two times) in each half. There may be some significance in the fact that עמל elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible has decidedly negative connotations<sup>11</sup>, while עשה is a more neutral term. We should note, for example, that עמל in Qohelet refers only to human work and never to what God does, while eight times the root עשה is used specifically of God's deeds (3:11,14,14; 7:13,14,29; 8:17; 11:5). Are we perhaps to conclude that while עמל and עשה are both appropriate terms for human work or action, and may be used as synonyms, the author does not consider עמל a suitable word to describe God's actions?

The phrase עמל שעמל תחת השמש occurs seven times in Qohelet, and we can trace some development in the way in which it is used. The phrase makes its first appearance in the key question asked in 1:3, מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש. An answer to this question is given in 2:11 where, after describing the deeds (s)he has performed, Qohelet says, ופניתי ... בעמל שעמלתי ... ואין יתרון תחת השמש. Following this, the hatred of his/her work expressed in 2:18 is not surprising: ושנאתי אני את-כל-עמלי שאני עמל תחת השמש. We then find ומי יודע החכם יהיה או סכל וישלט בכל-עמלי שעמלתי ושחכמתי תחת השמש in the next verse, which is presumably a rhetorical question. The author's reaction, expressed in v.20 is to turn to despair, וסבותי אני ליאש את-לבי על כל-העמל שעמלתי תחת השמש.

The remaining two occurrences of this phrase are, however, quite different. One of them appears in one of the verses which issue the 'call to enjoyment', and the other expresses sentiments which are very similar to these verses. 5:17 provides a striking contrast to 2:20: הנה אשר ראיתי אני טוב אשר-יפה לאכול ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש. The phrase עמל שיעמל תחת השמש takes exactly the same form as in 1:3, the only occasion when this happens, and 5:17 provides a very different answer to the question asked in that

<sup>11</sup> עמל is used 35 times in Qohelet, and only 40 times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Of these, all but 6 (Jdg 5:26; Pss 105:44; 127:1; Prov 16:26,26 and Jon 4:10) are decidedly negative. The 6 may indicate a neutral use of the term meaning simply 'work'.



verse to the answers given in ch.2. Then in 9:9 the author issues this exhortation to the reader, **ראה חיים עם-אשה אשר-אהבת ... כי הוא הלקך בחיים ובעמלך אשר אתה עמל תחת השמש**. This means that the phrase occurs in first, second and third person forms, and that its final occurrence is in the second person.

The very similar phrase **עשה שעשה תחת השמש** occurs six times in the book. It appears first in 1:14 which, as we noted above, is actually little more than a string of key words and phrases, **ראיתי את-כל-המעשים שנעשו תחת השמש והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח**. The next occurrence is in 2:11 where the phrase **עמל שעמל** is also used and this verse, too, is a string of key words and phrases:

**ופניתי אני בכל-מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות  
והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש**

It then occurs in 2:17, which contains a string of key phrases, very similar to 1:14 and 2:11, **ושנאתי את החיים כי רע עלי המעשה שנעשה תחת השמש כי הכל הבל ורעות רוח**.

Again there is development from the initial description of the task which the author has undertaken, to the realisation that **אין יתרון** in all the deeds that are done under the sun, and finally to the statement that (s)he hated life because of these deeds. In 4:3 (s)he goes on to state that the person who is best off is the one who **נעשה תחת השמש**. In 8:9, **את-כל-זה ראיתי ונתון את-לבי לכל-מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש**, the task which the author set him- or herself is recalled. Then in 8:17, which sees the final occurrence of the phrase, (s)he comes to the conclusion, **לא יוכל האדם למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש**. This phrase is slightly different every time it occurs in the book.

In addition, there are five occurrences of the phrase **עשה תחת השמש/השמים**. 1:13 describes the author's task, **ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה על כל-אשר נעשה תחת השמים**. In 2:3 (s)he determines to search until **אראה אי-זה טוב לבני האדם אשר יעשו תחת השמים**. In 4:1, **אראתי אני ואראה את-כל-העשקים אשר נעשים תחת השמש**, an example is given which clearly did not fulfil this requirement, and **זה רע בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש כי-מקרה אחד לכל** in 9:3 provides another. 9:6 says of the dead, **אשר-נעשה תחת השמש**. Only in these final two verses, 9:3,6, does the phrase appear in the same form: elsewhere it is always slightly different.

The phrase *נעשה תחת השמש על-הארץ* seems to be synonymous with *נעשה תחת השמש*, and it occurs twice. In 8:14 it introduces an example of what is *hebel*, *יש-הבל אשר נעשה על-הארץ*. 8:16, *כאשר נתתי את-לבי לדעת חכמה ולראות את-הענין אשר נעשה על-הארץ*, then refers again to the task the author undertook.

Altogether there are thirteen specific references to 'what is done under the sun, under heaven or on earth'. We might compare them in this way:

1:13	כל-	אשר	נעשה	תחת השמים
1:14	את- כל-	ש-	נעשו	תחת השמש
2:3		אשר	יעשו	תחת השמים
2:11	בכל-	ש-	עשו ...	תחת השמש
2:17		ש-	נעשה	תחת השמש
4:1	את- כל-	אשר	נעשים	תחת השמש
4:3	את-	הרע	נעשה	תחת השמש
8:9	לכל-	אשר	נעשה	תחת השמש
8:14		אשר	נעשה	על- הארץ
8:16	את-	הענין	נעשה	על- הארץ
8:17	את-	המעשה	נעשה	תחת השמש
9:3	בכל	אשר-	נעשה	תחת השמש
9:6	בכל	אשר-	נעשה	תחת השמש

Clearly this is an important theme in the book, but we should note that these particular phrases do not extend beyond 9:6. In fact, 9:10 probably serves as the conclusion to this theme, advising, *כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה כי אין מעשה וחשרון ודעת וחכמה בשאול*. This seems to be the direction in which the earlier verses are heading, and typical of verses in Qohelet which conclude a theme, it is also in the second person. The theme is first introduced in 1:13 when the author commits him-/herself to investigating wisely *all* that is done under heaven. This commitment is emphasised again in 2:3 when it is stated that the search will continue until (s)he finds what is good for people to do under heaven. However, as early as 1:14 the reader is forewarned about the conclusion to be drawn from this investigation when the author states, *הנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח*. The same terms are used in 2:11 to describe all that the author has done, and in 2:17 (s)he declares that (s)he hates life because these deeds are grievous to him/her. An example of grievous things that are done under the sun is examined briefly in ch.4 when the author turns to look into oppression. The conclusion here is that it is better not to have seen what is done under the sun. After a break from this theme from 4:4-8:8, it then reappears in 8:9-14 where the task of investigating all that is done under the sun is recalled and is explored in various ways. The particular focus seems to be that human deeds



do not result in expected or fair consequences, and this is stated clearly in v.14. The task outlined in 1:13 is recalled again in 8:16, and this time the conclusion, in the following verse, is that however hard they try people simply cannot understand what is done under the sun! 9:3 then notes an evil in all that is done under the sun - that one fate, death, comes to all, and 9:6 adds that the dead no longer have any share in what is done under the sun. The exhortation in 9:10 (and in the two verses preceding it) follows on from this by advising the reader to make the most of all that his or her hands find to do (לעשות).

It seems then that all the deeds that are done under the sun ultimately come to nothing because all people die and once they die they no longer share in these deeds. No wonder the author says of them, הכל הבל ורעות רוח.

However, there are also eight references to God's deeds. The claim is made in 3:13 that האלהים עשה שיראו מלפניו, כל-אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם. It should, perhaps, be recalled that in 9:6 it is stated about the dead that they no longer have a share לעולם בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש. 7:13, along similar lines to 3:13, issues the advice, ראה את-מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו. Perhaps connected with this verse is the statement in 7:29 that עשה האלהים את-האדם ישר. The remaining references to the deeds of God all make clear that knowledge of God's deeds is beyond human comprehension. 3:11 says, לא-ימצא האדם את-המעשה אשר-עשה האלהים. 7:14 then connects God's deeds with human inability to know the future, על-דברת שלע ימצא האדם אחריו מאומה, עשה האלהים ... 8:17 establishes a link between God's deeds and 'the deeds that are done under the sun', וראיתי את-כל-מעשה האלהים כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש, and states three times, לא יוכל האדם למצוא (although each time the words used are slightly different). 11:5, ascribing everything to God's action, states baldly in direct address to the reader, לא תדע את-מעשה האלהים אשר יעשה את-הכל.

We might compare the references to the 'deeds of God' thus:

	המעשה אשר-	עשה	האלהים	את-	3:11
	אשר יעשה	האלהים	כל-		3:14a
עשה		האלהים			3:14b
	מעשה	האלהים	את-		7:13
	עשה	האלהים			7:14
	עשה	האלהים			7:29
	מעשה	האלהים	את- כל-		8:17
	מעשה	האלהים אשר עשה	את-		11:5

Among these, only the occurrences in 7:14,29 are identical. It may be that the final verse of the book is designed to tie in with these verses:

	עשה	המעשה אשר- עשה האלהים	את- כל-	3:11
		אשר יעשה האלהים		3:14a
	עשה	האלהים		3:14b
		האלהים מעשה	את-	7:13
		עשה האלהים		7:14
		עשה האלהים		7:29
		האלהים מעשה	את- כל-	8:17
	האלהים אשר עשה	מעשה	את-	11:5
(יבא במשפט על כל נעלם)	האלהים	מעשה	את- כל-	12:14

When presented in this way, the form of the phrase is identical to that in 8:17, but the *zaqeph* between מעשה and אלהים in 12:14 means that the sense is rather different. If this diagram is merged with the one showing the references to ‘deeds done under the sun/under heaven/on earth’, it becomes clear that only at one point, 8:17, do the two themes meet. Otherwise, the passages that deal with deeds done on earth alternate with those passages that focus on God’s deeds:

	אשר נעשה תחת השמים	כל-	1:13
	ש- נעשו תחת השמש	את- כל- המעשים	1:14
	אשר יעשו תחת השמים		2:3
	ש- עשו... תחת השמש	בכל- מעשי	2:11
	ש- נעשה תחת השמש	המעשה	2:17
האלהים	אשר- עשה	המעשה	את- 3:11
האלהים	אשר יעשה	כל-	3:14a
האלהים עשה			3:14b
	אשר נעשים תחת השמש	את- כל- העשקים	4:1
	נעשה תחת השמש	את- המעשה הרע	4:3
האלהים		מעשה	את- 7:13
האלהים	עשה		7:14
האלהים	עשה		7:29
	אשר נעשה תחת השמש	לכל- מעשה	8:9
	אשר נעשה על-הארץ		8:14
	אשר נעשה על-הארץ	הענין	את- 8:16
האלהים		מעשה	את- כל- 8:17a
	אשר נעשה תחת השמש	המעשה	את- 8:17b
	אשר- נעשה תחת השמש	בכל	9:3
	אשר- נעשה תחת השמש	בכל	9:6
האלהים אשר עשה		מעשה	את- 11:5
האלהים		מעשה כל-	את- 12:14



#### 4.3.4 הבל

We have already noted that the word **הבל** occurs thirty-eight times in Qohelet. It occurs in every chapter except ch.10. However, its distribution is not even throughout the book. Its use is most concentrated in chs.1,2 (36.8%), while it does not appear at all between 9:9 and 11:8<sup>12</sup>, and then it only occurs once in 11:8, once in 11:10 and three times in the inclusio to the book in 12:8. Moreover, it is used a total of twenty-two times in the first half of the book, but only fourteen times in the second, and we noted above that it may actually be the central word in Qohelet. The word is used in twice as many verses (twenty) in the first half as in the second (ten).

This trend is confirmed if we examine the key phrases in which the word **הבל** is used. **גם-זה הבל** occurs a total of thirteen times in 2:15,19,21,23,26; 4:4,8,16; 5:9; 6:9; 7:6; 8:10,14; **גם-הוא הבל** is used once in 2:1; and **זה-הבל** once in 6:2. Thus 40.0% of the occurrences of this phrase are in chs.1,2, and 80.0% in the first half of the book. Moreover, the phrase does not occur beyond ch.8. **הכל הבל** appears six times in 1:2,14; 2:11,17; 3:19 and 12:8, which means that 66.7% are in the first two chapters, and 83.3% in the first half of the book. **הכל הבל ורעות רוח** is used three times, and all of these are in chs.1,2 (1:14; 2:11,17). **גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח** occurs three times, all in the first half (2:26; 4:4; 6:9), and the phrase **גם-זה הבל ורעיון רוח** appears once in these chapters (4:16). Of all these phrases, then, the only one which is used beyond ch.8 is one occurrence in the inclusio at the end of the book of **הכל הבל**. By contrast, the phrase **ימי (חיי) הבל** which appears four times, is found only in the second half of the book. In 6:12 it is used in the third person, in 7:15 in the first person and twice in 9:9, the last time it appears, in the second person. In each of these verses **הבל** takes the appropriate pronominal suffix, but it never takes a suffix in the first half of the book.

The development of the use of the word **הבל** seems to be from the use of the sweeping statement **הכל הבל** in chs.1,2, to the initially prolific but decreasing use of the specific description of the various things observed in chs.2-8 as **גם-זה הבל**, to the description of the life first of 'man' in general, then of the author him- or herself, and finally of the reader as **הבל** in

<sup>12</sup>Recalling Wright's theory based on the numerical value of **הבל** we might note that there are 37 verses from 9:9 to 11:8!

chs.6-9. The theme is then dropped for the following thirty-seven verses (one sixth of the book), before reappearing in the final few verses of the book. The end of 11:8 constitutes a suitable conclusion to the theme when the author notes that כל-שבא הבל, and adds in 11:10 that even youth and the dawn of life are *hebel*. הבל is then finally used three times in the inclusio in 12:8. Thus, while the word occurs in the 'motto', or inclusio, at the beginning and the end of Qohelet, and also possibly as the central word, it occurs considerably more often in the earlier chapters, and its use changes somewhat in the later chapters.

#### 4.3.5 טוב

טוב is one of the most frequently used words in Qohelet<sup>13</sup>. The search for what is 'good' appears to be a very important aspect of both halves of the book<sup>14</sup>. This is seen first in 2:1 where the author instructs him-/herself to ראה בטוב. Then in 2:3 (s)he determines to continue the search until אשר יעשו תחת השמים מספר ימי חייהם. The conclusion that (s)he reaches in 2:24, towards the end of the first section of the book (1:4-2:26), is, אין טוב באדם שיאכל ושתה והראה את-נפשו טוב בעמלו, and this is a notion which is repeated in the other 'call to enjoyment' passages (see 3:12,13,22; 5:17; 8:15; and also 9:7). In 2:26, however, we read that to the 'good' is given wisdom, knowledge and pleasure, while to the sinner is given the task of gathering only to give to the 'good'. Similar sentiments are expressed in 7:26 where טוב לפני האלהים escapes a woman's trap while the sinner is caught, and in 8:12-13, יודע אני אשר יהיה-טוב ליראי האלהים אשר ייראו מלפניו וטוב לא-יהיה לרשע. However, in 6:12 the question is asked, מי יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים; then in 7:20 it is asserted, אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא; and finally in 11:6 the author baldly states that, אינך יודע אי זה יכשר הזה או-זה ואם-שניהם כאחד טובים. Moreover, in 7:14 the reader is

<sup>13</sup>The conjunctive (or sometimes disjunctive) ו- is the most frequently occurring word (361 times), followed by the definite article (301 times), then the prepositions ל- (230 times) and ב- (159 times). The most frequent word after these is כל- (91 times); followed by אשר (89 times); כי (87 times); מן- (75 times); the object marker את- (74 times); ש- (68 times) and לא (65 times). There are then a number of key words/roots all occurring frequently: עשה (64 times); יטב/טוב (54 times); חכם (53 times); ראה (47 times); אדם (49 times); אין (44 times); ידע (44 times); לב (42 times); אלהים (40 times); עת ('time', 40 times); הבל (38 times); and עמל (35 times) (also גם 58 times, זה 43 times, על 38 times). In addition, דבר/אמר occur 52 times; כסל/סכל occur 33 times; רעה/רעע 32 times; נתן 28 times; חיה 26 times; יתר 18 times; מצא and שמח 17 times; מות 15 times; ענה and רשע 12 times; צדק 11 times; and ירא 9 times. This gives some indication of where the emphases of the book lie.

<sup>14</sup>Cf Clemens (1994:6), who sees here a specific connection with Gen 1-3.



exhorted, ביום טובה היה בטוב טביום רעה ראה גם את-זה לעמת-זה עשה האלהים, and then in 9:2 it seems to be disputed whether there is any ultimate difference between the good person and the sinner because כטוב כחטא ... לכל מקרה אחד לזדיק ולרשע לטוב ולטמא ולזבח.

So there seem to be two strands in Qohelet concerning 'what is good': one which specifies what is good and commends those who practise it; and one which denies that people know what is good, contends that there is no-one who always does what is good, and concludes that ultimately it makes no difference because the good die just like the bad. This is a good example of ambivalence in Qohelet which heightens the ambiguity of the book. There is also a third strand which states what is 'better'<sup>15</sup>. 4:17; 7:10 and 9:17 do not follow the structure of the other verses in this strand, but their contexts suggest that they fulfil a similar function, so they should probably be included in the list:

מ- אשר ישמח האדם במעשיו	(אין)	טוב	3:22
מ- שניהם (המתים והחיים)	(את אדר-עדן לא היה)	טוב	4:3
מ- מלא הפנים עמל ורעות רוח	מלא כף נחת	טוב	4:6
מ- האחד	השנים	טובים	4:9
מ- מלך זקן וכסיל	ילד מסכן	טוב	4:13
מ- תת הכסילים זבח	קרוב לשמע	ו- (טוב)	4:17
מ- שתדור ולא תשלם	אשר לא-תדר	טוב	5:4
מ- מנו (נפשו לא-תשבע מן-הטובה)	(הנפל)	טוב	6:3
מ- הלך-נפש	מראה עינים	טוב	6:9
מ- שמן טוב	שם	טוב	7:1a
מ- יום הולדו	יום המות	ו- (טוב)	7:1b
מ- לכת אל-בית משה	ללכת אל-בית-אבל	טוב	7:2
מ- שחק	כעס	טוב	7:3
מ- איש שמע שיר כסילים	לשמע גערת חכם	טוב	7:5
מ- ראשיתו	אחרית דבר	טוב	7:8a
מ- גבה-רוח	ארך-רוח	טוב	7:8b
מ- אלה	(יהמים הראשנים)	טובים היו	7:10
מ- האריה המת	(לכלב חי הוא)	טוב	9:4
מ- גבורה	חכמה	טובה	9:16
מ- זעקת מושל בכסילים	דברי חכמים בנחת נשמעים	(טובים)	9:17
מ- כלי קרב	חכמה	טובה	9:18

Clearly, the investigation of 'what is good', and the question about human ability to discern and practise it are important in Qohelet. In fact the final verse in the book, 12:14, concerns this theme: את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל-נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע.

We noted above that the structure of ch.4 seems to revolve round the alternate use of the first person forms of the verb ראה and the טוב מן- sayings. It may be that 4:17-5:6, which also contains a טוב מן- saying in 5:4, is part of the same section:

<sup>15</sup>On this form, what he calls the *Tob-Spruch* saying, see Ogden (1977,1980,1984).

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

טוב ... מ-

(...תחת השמש) וראיתי אני

טוב ... מ-

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

טובים ... מן-

טוב ... מ-

ראיתי ... תחת השמש

טוב ... מ-

7:1-8 consists of a series of such sayings. The first and last verses contain two short sayings without explanation, while the verses in between are made up of three טוב מן- sayings each followed by one or two lines to explain or expand the saying:

proverb	משמן טוב	טוב שם	(1)
proverb	מיום הולדו	ו- (טוב) יום המות	
proverb	מלכת אל-בית משתה	טוב ללכת אל-בית-אבל	(2a)
explanation		באשר הוא סוף כל-האדם והחי יתן אל-לבי	(2b)
proverb	משחק	טוב כעס	(3)
explanation		כי ברע פנים ייטב לב	
explanation		לב חכמים בבית אבל ולב כסילים בבית שמחה	(4)
proverb	מאיש שמע שיר כסילים	טוב לשמע גערת חכם	(5)
explanation		כי כקול הסירים תחת הסיר כן שחק הכסיל וגם-זה הבל	(6)
explanation		כי העשק יהולל חכם ויאבד את-לב מתנה	(7)
proverb	מראשיתו	טוב אחרית דבר	(8)
proverb	מגבה-רוח	טוב ארך-רוח	

7:1-8 is 78 words long, as is 7:9-15a. It may be that these later verses are designed as the second part of a longer section exploring what is 'good' or 'better'. They open with two exhortations that follow on in reverse order from the two proverbs in v.8, the second exhortation also containing a טוב מן- saying. V.11 then seems to be a deliberate play on the 'better than' form when עם- is used instead of the comparative מן-, טובה חכמה עם-נחלה. There is also a double play on the word טוב in the opening clause of v.14 when the author advises the reader, ביום טובה היה בטוב. There are two similar plays on this word in 7:1-8: the first is the use of the adjective טוב in v.1, and the second is the use of the verb יטב in v.3. 7:15b-22



seems then to explore another aspect of 'what is good' as it considers righteousness and wickedness, and other words in some way related to צדק and רשע. This includes the use twice of טוב: once in v.18 in a statement of what is better, טוב אשר תאחז בזה וגם-מזה אל-תנח את-ידך; and once in v.20 when it is asserted that in fact there is no-one who is righteous and does good, אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא. There may, then, be considerable irony in the statement in 7:26 in the next section, טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה וחוטא ילכד בה.

#### 4.3.6 חכם

'Wisdom' is another key concept in Qohelet, the root חכם occurring some fifty-three times in total. However, although the root is used so often in the book, its distribution is actually very uneven. Wisdom is a major feature of sections B and B' in 1:4-2:26, where the author is at pains to stress that the investigations (s)he undertakes are carried out 'in wisdom'. This is made very clear at the beginning of section B (1:13) where the author asserts that, ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה על כל-אשר נעשה תחת השמים. It is then reiterated in 2:3 where (s)he points out that even during the investigation of folly, לבי נהג בחכמה; and in 2:9 where, at the end of the description of all his/her deeds, the author asserts, אף חכמתי עמדה לי; and in 2:19 at the end of section B' we read about כל-עמלי שעמלתי ושחכמתי תחת השמש. In addition, there is a repeated emphasis on the author's wisdom: in 1:16 (s)he makes the claim, הוספתי חכמה על כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת, which suggests that the author had more wisdom than any other. Then in 2:15 (s)he asks him-/herself the question, למה חכמתי אני אז יותר. However, despite this superlative wisdom, the author also sets out to find wisdom and to examine it. This is made clear in 1:17, when (s)he states that, ופניתי אני לראות חכמה, and then adds in 2:12, ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה. In contrast to the emphasis on the wisdom the author has, uses, seeks and examines, a negative note is struck in 1:18, ברב חכמה רב-כעס ויוסף דעת יוסף מכאוב, and again in the comparison between wisdom and folly in 2:16 where (s)he concludes, ידעתי גם-אני שמקרה אחד יקרה את-כלם. Wisdom is then used as an inclusio to A' which sets human wisdom and knowledge against the wisdom and knowledge given by God.

After the opening two chapters of Qohelet, wisdom is referred to only twice until ch.7. This means that there is a heavy emphasis on the concept in chs.1,2 after which it all but dis-

appears until the second half of the book. In the second half it features throughout chs.7-10, with the highest concentration of words from the root חכם at the end of ch.9 and the beginning of ch.10. In particular, wisdom is a key element in the discussion of 'what is better' and 'what is good' in 7:1-8 and 9-15a; it also features in the following sections on 'righteousness and wickedness' (7:15-22), on 'what can and cannot be found' (7:23-29), and on 'the meaning of words' (8:1-7). At the end of ch.9 and the beginning of ch.10 the specific focus is a comparison of wisdom and folly. Although explicit reference to wisdom is rare throughout the rest of ch.10, it seems that the proverbs of which much of the chapter is made up relate to the earlier discussion about wisdom and folly.

The only occurrences of words from the root חכם in 8:9-9:10 are right at the centre of the section in 8:16,17 and 9:1. This section discusses 'what is done', the root עשה featuring more here than anywhere else in Qohelet.

It is significant in view of the considerable amount of attention given to the concept of wisdom in the book, that it is reiterated towards the end of the final chapter that Qohelet is wise - it may even be that (s)he is cast in 12:9-11 as a member of a professional body of wise people.

#### 4.3.7 ידע

Wisdom and knowledge are particularly closely linked in Qohelet. Every time the noun 'knowledge', דעת, or the infinitive form of the verb, also דעת, are used in the book they appear with the abstract noun חכמה, apart from two occasions where דעת appears with חכם:

לבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת	1:16
ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת	1:17
כי ברב חכמה רב-כעס ויוסיף דעת יוסיף מכאוב	1:18
יש אדם שעמלו בחכמה ובדעת	2:21
לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן חכמה ודעת	2:26
יתרון דעת החכמה תהיה בעליה	7:12
סבותי אני ולבי לדעת ולתור ובקש חכמה וחשבון ולדעת	7:25
אשר נתתי את-לבי לדעת חכמה	8:16
אם-יאמר החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא	8:17
אין מעשה וחשבון ודעת וחכמה בשאול	9:10
ויתר שהיה קהלת חכם עוד למד-דעת את-העם	12:9

In addition, in 4:13, טוב ילד מסכן וחכם ממלך זקן וכסיל אשר לא-ידע להזהר עור, the terms חכם and לא-ידע are contrasted. Moreover, it is implied that a wise person has knowledge in the



rhetorical questions in 6:8, מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל מה-לעני יודע להלך נגד החחים, and in 8:1, ידע לב חכם. There is a similar implication in 8:5, which ends, ידע לב חכם. And we find חכמים and ידעים together in a list in 9:11. It is particularly noteworthy that wisdom and knowledge are so closely connected three times in ch.1 - indeed, from the very first occurrence of the root ידע this link is established, and it is further strengthened by the parallelism of the proverb in 1:18.

This is an important observation in light of our considerations above concerning wisdom, because wisdom and knowledge together are the main themes of the second half of the book, except in the discussion of 'what is done' in 8:9-9:10. We noted that wisdom features throughout chs.7-10, and we might now add that what is 'known' and, more especially, 'not known' is the main theme in the first six verses of ch.11. Moreover, we also observed above that the verses stating that people do not know what the future holds is an important aspect of the second half, and words from the root ידע occur often throughout this part of the book. Taking all these factors together, we might roughly divide the second half of the book in this way:

**introduction (6:10-12)**

ending with a verse about not knowing the future

**section dealing with wisdom/knowledge in various ways (7:1-8:8)**

ending with a verse about not knowing the future

**central section dealing with 'deeds' (8:9-9:10)**

with passage about what cannot be known at centre

**section dealing with wisdom/knowledge in various ways (9:11-11:6)**

ending with a passage concerning what is 'not known'

**concluding passage on youth, old age and death (11:7-12:8)**

**epilogue (12:9-14)**

Again this is not proposed as a definitive structure for this part of the book<sup>16</sup>, but it is a useful way to represent our observations about wisdom and knowledge, and, like our conclusions for the first half, gives a very general framework for the later chapters.

As well as the nouns and the infinitives from the root ידע, there are also thirty-one verbs. Five of these are the first person forms we noted above, and of the remaining twenty-six, nine are preceded by לא (4:13; 6:5; 8:5; 9:11,12; 10:14,15; 11:2,5), seven by אין (4:17; 8:7; 9:1,5,10; 11:5,6), and four by מי in what appear to be rhetorical questions expecting the

<sup>16</sup>It should by now be clear that we agree with Good (1978:71) when he says, 'It is, to say the least, unlike Qoheleth to wrap everything into a tidy package.'

negative answer, 'no-one knows' (2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1). Thus twenty of the thirty-one verbs from this root (64.5%) imply that people do not know. We might also note that **לֹא מֵצֵא** in 7:14 conveys similar sentiments to the verses concerned with not knowing the future, although it does not contain the reference to **מֵה-יְהִי(שׁ)** found in all the other verses. 8:17 does likewise with its use three times of **מֵצֵא** (**לֹא (יֻכַּל ל־)**). This serves again to highlight the emphasis in these final chapters of Qohelet on the limitations to human knowledge, and the confusion over the use of **מֵצֵא** and **לֹא-מֵצֵא** in 7:26-29 may serve a similar purpose<sup>17</sup>. This is anticipated in 3:11, **לֹא-יִמְצֵא הָאָדָם אֶת-הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים מֵרֵאשׁ וְעַד-סוֹף**.

Both **לֹא יָדַע** and **אֵין יָדַע** occur for the final time in ch.11 in the second person, and the imperative is used in 11:9. **מֵצֵא** is also used in second person form in 11:1. There is, however, one word from each root in the epilogue (12:9,10) which is not in the second person.

#### 4.4 Conclusions concerning structures and patterns in Qohelet

Qohelet is a tantalising book. It is clear that there are a number of threads and themes which run through the book, although many of those which start in ch.1 seem to have petered out by chs.9,10. There also seem to be various patterns in particular sections of the book, and a few trends which invite the reader to seek an 'all-embracing plan' for the book. It may well be that Delitzsch is right to argue that all such attempts will fail, but the various features of Qohelet which we have examined above will probably continue to attract attention and provoke speculation about how it is structured. Before moving on to discuss the ambiguity of the book, we will attempt to draw these features together and in the next chapter we will tentatively suggest ways in which they might function to give at least a rough idea of a structure and development within the book.

Consideration of the most frequently occurring words in the book provides a good starting point. The deeds that are done, under the sun, on earth, or by God, are important as is indicated by the use of the root **עָשָׂה** 64 times. What is 'good' is a key theme, evidenced by the occurrences 51 times of the word **טוֹב**, and three times of closely related words. As part of

<sup>17</sup>Fox and Porten (1978:29) assert that "MS' is a near-synonym of YD', a synonym that is clear in 8:17."



this general theme we should also note that צדק is used 11 times, רעה/רעע 32 times, רשע 12 times and חטא 8 times. 'Wisdom' is an important aspect of the book, חכם occurring 53 times; and related to this theme are 'folly' (כסל/סכל) 33 times and הלל 7 times), and 'knowledge' (ידע 44 times). What is 'seen' is important, ראה occurring 51 times, as is what is 'said', the roots אמר and דבר being used 20 times and 32 times respectively. 'Man' is mentioned 59 times (אדם 49 times and איש 10 times), while God is explicitly referred to 40 times. 'Time' is also mentioned 40 times, although most of these are in the poem in 3:1-8. There are also 40 references to the human 'heart' or 'self' using the word לב, and some of the 7 occurrences of נפש may be synonymous. הבל is clearly an important word in the book because of its use in the 'motto' at the beginning and end, and its use 38 times throughout the book. עמל is important, occurring 35 times. תחת השמש/השמים is used 32 times. We noted above the importance of the first person in chs.1,2, and this is emphasised by the appearance 29 times of the pronoun אני. 'Giving', and what is given, seem to be important because of the use 27 times of the root נתן. Of particular significance is what is given by God. Explicit reference to 'life' (חיה) is made 26 times, and to 'death' (מות) 15 times - but both, particularly death using the root קרה (10 times), are alluded to as well. 'Day' and 'days' are also mentioned 26 times. The root יתר is used 18 times, 10 of these in the form יתרון. שמח, 'joy', and מצא, 'to find', both occur 17 times; and אכל, 'to consume', and אחר, 'after', both 15 times. We should perhaps also note the use of negatives in the book: לא is used 65 times; אין 44 times (but יש only 16 times); אל 21 times; and the interrogatives מה- (24 times) and מי (17 times) may at least sometimes introduce rhetorical questions expecting a negative answer.

We have considered various trends in the book. There is a very clear trend from first person language in the early chapters to second person address towards the end. It may also be that in the early chapters first person verbs are important indicators of structure, but this decreases as the book progresses, and the increasing difficulty of discerning the structure of passages later in the book correlates with this. There are corresponding trends from the author's investigation of what occurs under the sun in the early chapters to admonition directed to the reader in the later chapters, and from observation of what happens on earth to more philosophical and moral considerations. The distribution of the 'calls to enjoyment' may indi-

cate that there is more of a focus on 'what is good for people' in the early chapters, while the distribution of verses asserting that 'nobody knows the future' may suggest that the later chapters are concerned more with limitations on human knowledge. Most of the words and phrases which are often viewed as characteristic of Qohelet appear in greater concentration in the early chapters, and many of them peter out by the beginning of ch.10. These include גם-זה הבל (and near-equivalents), רעות/רעיון רוח, מה-יתרון (and near equivalents), עמל and תחת השמש (and near equivalents), and הבל is also used more in the early chapters, and its use changes later in the book.

We have already noted a number of ways in which some of these themes and trends may help the reader to discern patterns and structures in the book, particularly in chs.1,2. In the next chapter we will explore ways in which the same techniques might be applied to the remaining chapters of the book - although again it should be noted that these are not proposed as definitive, but rather illustrative of how the determinate schemata may be utilised to try to give some overall shape to the book.



## **CHAPTER 5, Structures and Patterns in 3:1-12:14**

It should be emphasised again that the structures and divisions proposed in this chapter are by no means definitive. Rather they are an attempt to utilise statistics, trends and patterns, some of which we have already drawn attention to, to break down the book into manageable sections within which the author's use of ambiguity can be investigated. The difficulty in delineating the structure of the book and of dividing it into appropriate sections has already been noted, and it must be acknowledged that if the book is structured or divided differently, the sections will function differently and the ambiguities of the text might operate in different ways. This also is an aspect of the ambiguous nature of the book: that is to say, how the reader structures and divides the book will influence the meaning (s)he perceives in it, and, as we have sought to demonstrate, Qohelet is particularly susceptible to being structured and divided in many different ways. Of course, it may also be the case that the meaning the reader perceives will affect the way in which (s)he structures and divides the book. Such is the nature of interpretation, but perhaps in Qohelet more than other biblical books one should beware of the danger of finding in the text simply what (s)he reads into it. It is for this reason that considerable effort needs to be expended in discerning the determinate schemata in the text which keep the reader in check. Thus while no special authority is claimed for the structures and divisions presented here, we are seeking to set our study of ambiguity within a context meticulously drawn from the text within which it operates.

### **5.1            3:1-22**

#### **5.1.1        3:1-8, a poem about the 'appropriate time'**

There is clearly a change of theme at the beginning of ch.3, and 3:1-8 seems to bear little connection with the preceding passage. There are no first person terms in these verses, and none of the key words and phrases which featured in chs.1,2 occur here - with the exceptions of the root **דבר** (v.7), which is very common in the Hebrew Bible, and the express-

ion תחת השמים (v.1), which occurs only three times in Qohelet and is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, compared to twenty-nine occurrences of תחת השמש which does *not* appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In fact it may be that תחת השמים is used instead of תחת השמש specifically to signal a change of theme - recalling its use earlier as an inclusio to section B of the first two chapters.

3:1-8 is further marked out from what went before, and also the verses which come after, by the total absence of perfect and imperfect verbs and active participles, and also of adjectives and adverbs. Moreover, only here in the whole book are there eight consecutive verses without a third person verb or suffix. By contrast, twenty-seven of the thirty-three infinitive constructs in Qohelet are in these eight verses.

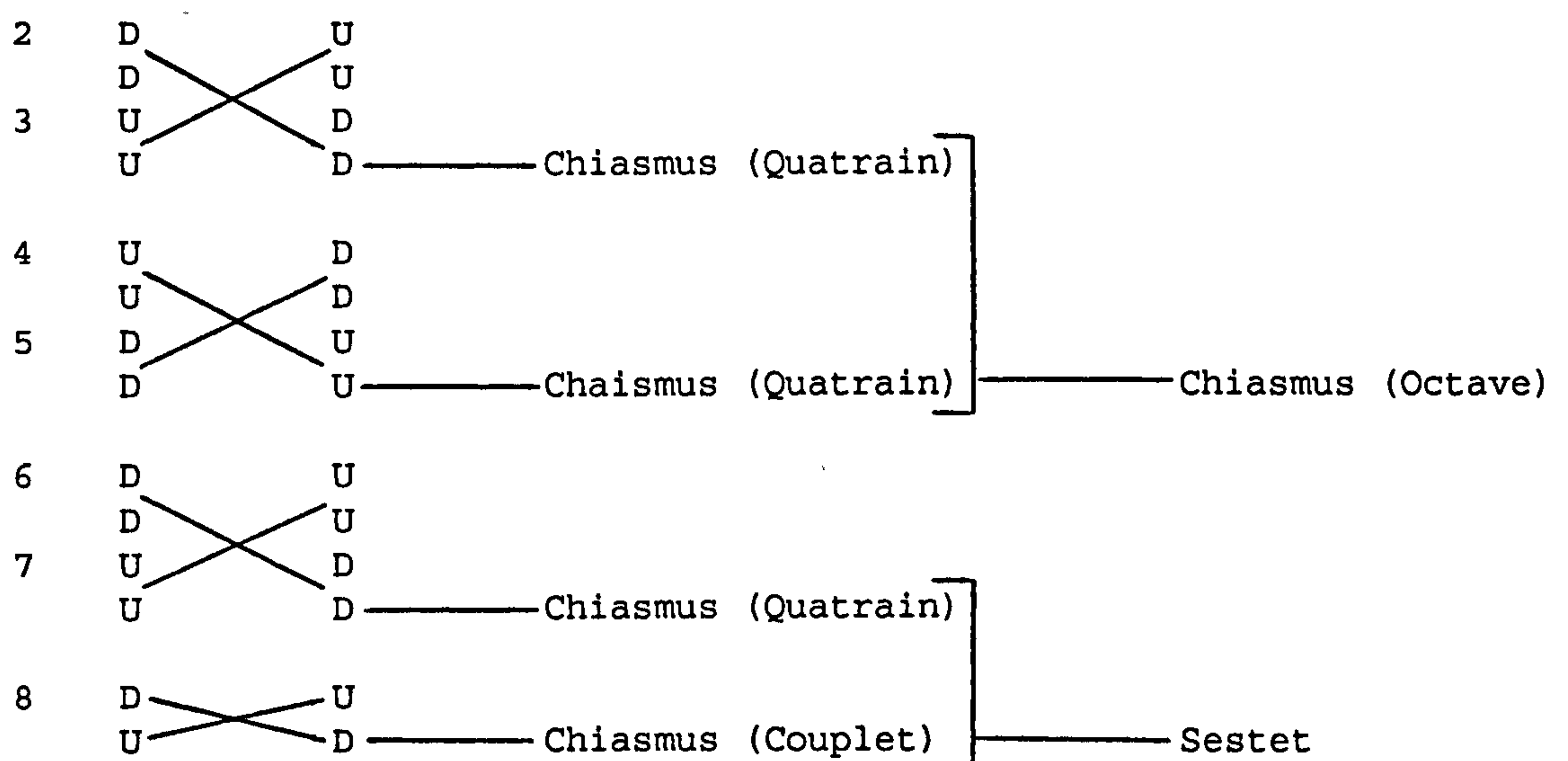
It is noteworthy that עמל is used only twice in the whole of ch.3 (vv.9,13), הבל and תחת השמש both occur only once (vv.19 and 16 respectively), while the roots חכם and סכל/כסל, and the expression רעות רוח do not appear at all. These were all important features of the previous chapters. By contrast, the word אלהים, which occurred only once in ch.1 and twice in ch.2, is used eight times in 3:10-18 (vv.10,11,13,14,14,15,17,18).

V.1 serves as an introduction to the poem in vv.2-8. It uses words which are important in Qohelet: תחת השמים and חפץ, כל, דבר, which are particularly common elsewhere. Indeed, of the twenty-nine different words in the poem, nine words occur only here in the book<sup>1</sup>. However, 'being born' and especially 'dying' feature elsewhere, and 'seeking' is referred to quite often, although the specific root בקש, found here in v.6, is used only seven times. It seems, then, that the poem is not designed specifically to include the major themes of the book. Indeed, its distinctiveness and lack of features that are characteristic of Qohelet might suggest that it did not originate with the author of the rest of the book, but was adopted by him from another source. However, its intricate structuring certainly is compatible with its authorship being the same, and the differences serve to draw particular attention to the poem.

<sup>1</sup> לעקור, in v.2; לרפוא and להרוג in v.3; רקור and לבבות in v.4; להשליך in vv.5,6; לקרוע, לתפור and להשות in v.7. In addition, words from the root ילד occur 9 times, מות 15 times and נסע 5 times (v.2); בנה twice and פרץ 3 times (v.3); שחק 5 times and ספר twice (v.4); אבן twice, כנס 3 times, חבק twice and רחק 3 times (v.5); בקש 7 times, אבר 6 times and שמר 9 times (v.6); אהב 6 times, שנא 5 times, לחם 3 times and שלם 4 times (v.8). עת occurs 40 times in Qohelet, 28 of which are in this poem.



Loader (1979:11) says of this poem, 'In 3:2-8 we have the most intricate chiastic composition in the Old Testament'<sup>2</sup>. He argues that the orientation of 'desirable' (D) and 'undesirable' (U)<sup>3</sup> elements in each pair is carefully structured. He divides the poem into four parts each of which displays a chiasmic arrangement: the first two parts both contain four comparisons and together make up an octave; the third part also consists of four comparisons but the final one has only two, so that these parts together make up a 'sestet'. Hence the title of Loader's article (1969), 'Qohelet 3:2-8 - A "Sonnet" in the Old Testament'<sup>4</sup>. He illustrates the 'sonnet' thus:



The last strophe here is different because it indicates the conclusion of the poem.

There may be something in Loader's theory, because in very general terms the two labels he uses do seem fitting in at least most cases, and this would be typical of the careful structuring of parts of this book. However, the point of the poem seems to be that there is a time for *everything* - and that includes those things that Loader terms 'undesirable'. Moreover, later in the book a preference is expressed for what might be termed 'undesirable' things. For example, in ch.7 the author asserts, 'It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting' (v.2); 'Sorrow is better than laughter' (v.3); and 'The end of a thing is better than its beginning' (v.8). Perhaps most notable, considering the opening of the

<sup>2</sup>He calls this poem '*chiasmus chiasmorum*'.

<sup>3</sup>He later (1986:34) terms these 'favourable' and 'unfavourable'.

<sup>4</sup>Lohfink (1987:237) also divides the poem into two parts, but he argues, 'the first has six, the second eight contrasting pairs.'

poem in 3:2-8, *עת ללדת ועת מות*, is the second half of 7:1, *ו-יום המות מיום הולדו*, which seems to reverse Loader's labels. Moreover, if we compare the sentiments expressed in 4:2, *ושבח אני את-המתים שכבר מתו מן-החיים אשר המה חיים עדנה*, and the similar sentiments found in 6:3-5, with 9:4, *מי אשר יבחר אל כל החיים יש בטחון כי לכלב חי הוא טוב מן-האריה המת*, we find support for the contention in 3:2 that there is an appropriate time *both* for being born and for dying. Perhaps, then, the sweeping statement that one is desirable and the other undesirable is inappropriate in the context of this book. What seems to be important in the poem is the contrast between the two elements in each pair which as opposite extremes are representative of the whole arena of human life. A number of commentators have observed that the poem consists of twenty-eight clauses, which is four sevens - the number of completion. Lohfink (1987:237), for example, explains:

In his famous poem "concerning time" (3:2-8) Qoheleth describes the fullness of the time at humanity's disposal in opposite extremes. There are twenty-eight such times ( $= 4 \times 7$ ): seven, the number of completion, perfection; four, the cardinal points of the heavens.<sup>5</sup>

Loader (1986:33) refers to 'the absolute symmetry of the entire poem and the precise balance of every pronouncement.' The poem *is* carefully structured, and it may be that the reader is expected to detect the kind of positive and negative nuances that Loader points out. These give the inclusiveness of the poem an ironic twist - yes, there is a time for *everything*, even things you now perceive as negative or undesirable. 7:14 expresses similar sentiments, except that in this verse desirable and undesirable things or times are specifically put down to God's action, *ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה גם את-זה לעמת-זה עשה האלהים*.

However, the poem is not so precisely balanced as Loader makes out. It comprises fourteen pairs, most of which are formed in precisely the same way: each pair follows the same basic pattern, *... עת ... ועת*, and most have only one word after each *עת*. The exceptions are the second pair, where *לעקות נטוע* is set in parallel with *נטוע*; the seventh, where the plural noun *אבנים* is added to both verbs; and the eighth, where *לרחק מחבק* is set against *לחבוק*:

<sup>5</sup>See also, Hertzberg (1932:84); Chamakkala (1977:120), and especially Gordis's article, 'The Heptad as an Element of Biblical and Rabbinic Style' (1943).



### Disruption of pattern - extra words

ועת ללדת	ועת למות
ועת לטעת	ועת לעקור <u>נטוע</u>
ועת להרוג	ועת לרפוא
ועת לפרוץ	ועת לבנות
ועת לבכות	ועת לשחוק
ועת ספור	ועת רקוד
ועת להשליך <u>אבנים</u>	ועת כנוס <u>אבנים</u>
ועת לחבוק	ועת לרחק <u>מחבק</u>
ועת לבקש	ועת לאבד
ועת לשמור	ועת להשליך
ועת לקרוע	ועת לתפור
ועת לחשות	ועת לדבר
ועת לאהב	ועת לשנא
ועת מלחמה	ועת שלום

These exceptions also account for three of the four words, other than עת, that are repeated - the fourth is להשליך, the first element of the seventh pair and the second element of the tenth:

### Disruption of pattern - repetition of words

ועת ללדת	ועת למות
ועת לטעת	ועת לעקור <u>נטוע</u>
ועת להרוג	ועת לרפוא
ועת לפרוץ	ועת לבנות
ועת לבכות	ועת לשחוק
ועת ספור	ועת רקוד
ועת להשליך <u>אבנים</u>	ועת כנוס <u>אבנים</u>
ועת לחבוק	ועת לרחק <u>מחבק</u>
ועת לבקש	ועת לאבד
ועת לשמור	ועת להשליך
ועת לקרוע	ועת לתפור
ועת לחשות	ועת לדבר
ועת לאהב	ועת לשנא
ועת מלחמה	ועת שלום

In all but the final pair the words contrasted are infinitive constructs, and all of these apart from ספור and רקוד, in the sixth pair, and כנוס in the seventh, take the preposition, ל-:

### Absence of the preposition, ל-

ועת ללדת	ועת למות
ועת לטעת	ועת לעקור <u>נטוע</u>
ועת להרוג	ועת לרפוא
ועת לפרוץ	ועת לבנות
ועת לבכות	ועת לשחוק
ועת -ספור	ועת -רקוד
ועת להשליך <u>אבנים</u>	ועת -כנוס <u>אבנים</u>
ועת לחבוק	ועת לרחק <u>מחבק</u>
ועת לבקש	ועת לאבד
ועת לשמור	ועת להשליך
ועת לקרוע	ועת לתפור
ועת לחשות	ועת לדבר
ועת לאהב	ועת לשנא
ועת -מלחמה	ועת -שלום

The final pair are both nouns, and it may well be, as Whybray (1989:68) suggests, that ‘this syntactical variation is probably simply a way of marking the completion of the series.’

Should we read anything into all these slight deviations from the general pattern of the poem? The individual examples appear to have no particular significance, but perhaps the disruption of the pattern is important because it means that the poem, like the book in general, refuses to be squeezed into a uniform scheme. There may be an appropriate time for everything, and people may think that careful observation of life will enable them to define what those times are - however, there will always be exceptions which cannot be predicted.

### 5.1.2 3:9-22, the deeds of God and the death of ‘man’

The opening verse of this section indicates that the poem about time is over, and links back to the previous chapters by its resemblance to the key question in 1:3,

מה-יתרון לאדם	בכל-עמלו	ש-	יעמל תחת השמש	1:3
מה-יתרון העושה	ב-	אשר הוא	עמל	3:9

We will consider later the differences between these two verses.

We noted above the pattern of first person verbs in this section which give some structure to the passage:

ראיתי

ידעתי

ידעתי

CENTRE - ראיתי תחת השמש

אמרתי

אמרתי

וראיתי

It might be noted that unlike 2:11-19 and 4:1-7 none of these verbs except the final one is preceded by a *waw*, although there is no obvious reason for its omission in this passage as the sense of the verbs seems to be the same:



2:11-19  
 ופניתי  
 ופניתי  
 (לראות)  
 וראיתי  
 וידעתי  
 ואמרתי  
 ודברתי  
 ושנאתי  
 ושנאתי

3:9-22  
 ראיתי  
 ידעתי  
 ידעתי  
 ראיתי  
 אמרתי  
 אמרתי  
 וראיתי

4:1-7  
 ושבתי  
 וראיתי  
 ושבתי

Only at the centre, in vv.16-17, does the phrase **תחת השמש** occur in 3:9-22, but what is observed here is significant because the whole section revolves round it.

The second part of v.16, after **ועוד ראיתי תחת השמש** which serves as an introduction, is presented in two balanced phrases, even to the number of letters in each:

מקום	המשפט	שמה	הרשע
ומקום	הצדק	שמה	הרשע

This type of construction is very common in Hebrew poetry - indeed, we have already met some examples in Qohelet:

1:15	מעות	לא-יוכל	לתקן
	וחסרון	לא-יוכל	להמנות
1:18	ברב	חכמה	רב-כעס
	ויוסיף	דעת	מכאוב
3:3	עת להרוג	ועת לרפוא	
	עת לפרוץ	ועת לבנות	

Often the second line restates the sentiments of the first line in slightly different terms, while a common element is retained in both. For example, in 1:15 **לא-יוכל** remains constant while the terms either side of it change; in 1:18 the near-synonym **ויוסיף** in the second line maintains the thought expressed by **ברב** in the first line while the other words change, and in 3:3 (and, indeed, throughout the 'time' poem in 3:2-8) **ועת ... עת** remains constant while the other

words change. What is striking about 3:16 is the repetition of הרשע where we might have expected a similar, but different, word to be used<sup>6</sup>. This greatly emphasises הרשע and it is further stressed by the unusual and emphatic word שמה which precedes it<sup>7</sup>.

The key words from v.16, משפט, הרשע and הצדק, recur in v.17, but in the opposite order. The use of these words in the two verses might be represented thus:



This reveals a chiasmic structure with הרשע at the centre. The phrase תחת השמש from v.17 and the word האלהים from v.17 might then be added to give this structure:

תחת השמש  
המשפט  
הרשע  
הצדק  
הרשע  
הצדק  
הרשע  
ישפט  
האלהים

This suggests that in v.16 justice 'under the sun' degenerates into wickedness, while v.17 proceeds from the wickedness at the end of v.16 to justice re-established by God. In this way, v.17 can be seen as a structurally balanced response to the problem posed in v.16. That this is intentional is suggested by the unusual word order in v.17 where the verb, ישפט, and subject, האלהים, are placed after the objects of that verb, את-הצדיק ואת-הרשע. The reader may wonder, though, why this chiasmus has been designed to revolve around the word רשע. The chiasmus is also the centre of 3:9-22, with 93 words preceding it, and 92 words following it, so that רשע is the centre of the whole section. In fact, the phrase שמה הרשע is precisely at the centre, with 101 words before and after it.

<sup>6</sup>This has lead some scholars to conclude that there is a textual error here. For example, Barton (1912:111) writes,

[Gratz] noted that in the two halves of the vs. it is tautological, and conjectured that instead of the second we should read פשע, transgression, a conjecture which [Driver] also makes. This is probably right. Had it any MS. authority I should introduce it into the text.

<sup>7</sup>שמה is used in this same way in Jer 18:2 and Ps 122:5.



The first half of the section focuses on God's deeds, using especially the roots עשה and נתן. V.10 refers to הענין אשר נתן אלהים; v.11 then discusses המעשה אשר עשה האלהים; v.13 concludes with כל-אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם; v.14 informs us that מתת אלהים; and, finally, v.15 states that האלהים יבקש את-נרדף. God is also the most likely subject for the two singular nouns, עשה and נתן, which occur in the first half of v.11, את-הכל עשה יפה בעתו גם את-העלם נתן בלבם.

The use of the verb נתן three times here may recall its use three times in 2:26. Moreover, 2:24 is very similar to 3:12,13, both being part of the thread of 'call to enjoyment' verses. Indeed, if מקום הצדק שמה הרשע is the precise centre of 3:9-22, then the 'call to enjoyment' in 3:12,13 is the precise centre of the first half - there being 39 words either side of it. When it is recalled that עמל featured frequently at the end of ch.2, that עשה is a key word here, and that the two seem to be used synonymously, it is clear that this passage picks up on some of the themes at the end of ch.2. Of course, there עמל referred to human work, here עשה refers to what God does. As we hinted above, this may be an important distinction.

The first half specifically mentions 'man' three times, a different expression being used each time:

v.10	בני	האדם
v.11		האדם
v.13	כל-	האדם

It seems that, typical of this book, we have here three different terms used to convey precisely the same thing. In this half there are also six explicit references to God (in vv.10,11,13,14, 14,15). By contrast, in the second half God is only mentioned twice, in the first two verses, while 'man' is referred to five times, once in each of the last five verses:

v.18	בני	האדם
v.19	בני	האדם
v.20		האדם
v.21	בני	האדם
v.22		האדם

This indicates a change of focus from God to humanity.

Where the centre of section B' in 1:4-2:26 was the statement that one fate befalls both the fool and the wise person, in the second half of this section it is the fact that humans and animals come to the same end that is central. In 2:14 it was stated of the wise and the foolish,

מקרה בני-האדם ומקרה הבהמה ומקרה אחד להם; 3:19 asserts that מקרה אחד יקרה את-כלם. However, this is not the centre of this half of the passage: the precise centre is the phrase, ומותר האדם מן-הבהמה אין, and the passage expands outwards from this statement in even sections:

	introduction	(17 words)
אמרתי אני בלבי על-דברת בני האדם לברם האלהים לראות שהם בהמה המה להם		
כי מקרה בני-האדם ומקרה הבהמה ומקרה אחד להם		
כמות זה כן כות זה		
ורוח אחד לכל		
ומותר האדם מן-הבהמה אין		
כי הכל הבל		
הכל הולך אל-מקום אחד		
הכל היה מן-העפר והכל שב אל-העפר		
מי יודע רוח בני האדם העלה היא למעלה ורוח הבהמה הירדת היא למטה לארץ		
	conclusion	(18 words)

There is a careful balance here. The centre states that people have no advantage over beast. The two phrases out from this explain the centre by referring to the 'breath/wind/spirit' which is common to 'all' - ironically linking רוח and הבל. Out from this again 'all going to one place' is equated with death. The next stage out balances the statements about 'breath/wind/spirit' with a reference to the dust of which both people and animals are made up, and the common fate here is to return to the dust from which both came. And finally the outside lines are both difficult and their precise translation uncertain. We shall return to these later.

A glance at the number of occurrences of certain words in the chiasmus (excluding the introduction and conclusion) gives a good indication of the emphasis of this passage:

כל	5 times
האדם	4 times
בהמה	4 times
מקרה	3 times
אחד	3 times
רוח	3 times
עפר	2 times
מות	2 times
אלהים	1 time

This suggests that all, both humans and animals, meet one fate. They share the same breath, they are all dust, and they all die. As in chs.1,2, God features very little.

The introduction starts with the word אמרתי in v.17, and links back to the first half of 3:9-22. The chiasmus follows on from the second occurrences of אמרתי in v.18. The conclu-



sion is introduced by the word וראיתי in v.22. It consists of a 'call to enjoyment', and the first of the verses that assert human inability to know the future. This means that this section, like 1:4-2:26, has a 'call to enjoyment' towards the end; but if the section includes 3:1-8, it also has a 'call to enjoyment' near the centre. In this case, the precise centre would be the phrase יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם, which serves as a suitable contrast to the catalogue of the author's deeds at the centre of 1:4-2:26. While 3:9-22 does stand as a unit in its own right, delineated by the larger chiasmus and revolving round the smaller one in vv.16,17, the phrase in v.11, את-הכל עשה יפה בעתו, might well relate to the poem in 3:1-8. Thus, after the introductory verse, the chapter would start with a reference to birth and death and, apart from the concluding verse, end with a discussion of death.

The conclusion to ch.3 bears some striking resemblances to the end of ch.2: not only is there a 'call to enjoyment' in both, but both also use the form ... כי ... כי ... כי, ראייתי כי,

2:24-26  
אין-טוב באדם שיאכל ושתה והראה את-נפשו טוב בעמלו  
גם-זה ראייתי אני  
כי מיד האלהים  
כי מי יאכל ומי יחוש חוץ ממני  
כי לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן חכמה ודעת ושמחה ולחוטא

3:22  
וראייתי  
כי אין טוב מאשר ישמה האדם במעשיו  
כי-הוא חלקו  
כי מי יביאנו לראות במה שיהיה אחריו

## 5.2 4:1-5:6, what is good/better for people

Ch.4 picks up on a number of features and themes from chs.1,2. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that while תחת השמש and הבל were used only once each in ch.3 (vv.16,19), and רעות רוח not at all, all three appear more often here. תחת השמש occurs five times (vv.1,3,5,7,15); הבל four times (vv.4,7,8,16); and רעות רוח three times (4,6,16). עמל, an important word in ch.2, appeared only twice in ch.3, but it occurs five times in ch.4 (vv.4,6,8,8,9). Likewise, the first person pronoun, אני, was used only twice in the previous chapter, but also appears five times here (vv.1,2,4,7,8). כל (vv.1,4,4,8,15,16,16) and עשה (vv.1,3,3,4,16) continue from ch.3, but do not occur as frequently in this chapter as they did

there, and אדם (which is found in every other chapter of the book) and אלהים, which both featured regularly in the previous section, do not occur at all in this one.

The distribution of all these words and phrases should be noted, because they occur most often in the first half of the chapter, after which there is a break until they reappear in the final verses of the chapter. We might represent this with a diagram in which the numbers represent a verse where there is at least one occurrence, and a dot represents a verse where the word or phrase is not found:

תחת השמש	1	.	3	.	5	.	7	.	.	.	.	.	.	15	.
הבל	.	.	.	4	.	.	7	8	.	.	.	.	.	.	16
רעות/רעיון רוח	.	.	.	4	.	6	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	16
אני	1	2	.	4	.	.	7	8	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
כל	1	.	.	4	.	.	.	8	.	.	.	.	.	.	16
עמל	.	.	.	4	.	6	.	8	9	.	.	.	.	.	.
עשה	1	.	3	4	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	15	16

The two words אחר and שנים are of particular importance in filling in the gap in the above diagram. They are distributed thus:

אחר	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	8	9	10	11	12	.	.	.	.
שנים	.	.	3	.	.	.	.	8	9	10	11	12	.	.	15	.

Also the roots מלך and ילד occur three times each in vv.13-15 which completes the picture:

מלך	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	13	14	.	.
ילד	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	13	14	15	.

On this basis the chapter might be divided into three sections, the second of which compares 'one' and 'two', and the third of which compares a king and a youth. The first section further divides into two parts (vv.1-3 and 4-6), each of which starts with a first person observation of what happens 'under the sun' using the verb ראה, and ends with a טוב מן- saying. The next section (vv.7-12) also opens with a first person form of the verb ראה and the phrase תחת השמש, but the טוב מן- saying is at the centre; while the last section (vv.13-16) commences with a טוב מן- saying and has ... תחת השמש ראייתי at the centre<sup>8</sup>. This might be represented, as we suggested above, in this way:

<sup>8</sup>But see Ogden (1984) who argues on the basis of the 'better than' sayings that 4:1-12 is a unit that divides 4:1-3,4-6,7-9,10-12a,12b.



ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

טוב ... מ-

(...תחת השמש) וראיתי אני

טוב ... מ-

ושבתי אני ואראה ... תחת השמש

טובים ... מן-

טוב ... מ-

ראיתי ... תחת השמש

This structure implies that the overall theme of ch.4 is 'what is better in light of what I have seen under the sun'.

The first part (vv.1-3) explores an example of what is done under the sun. This is clear from the use of **אשר נעשים תחת השמש** in the first verse, and **אשר נעשה תחת השמש** at the end. The specific example is oppression, this being emphasised by the use of the plural **עשקים** in three different ways to denote the abstract concept 'oppression', 'the oppressed' and 'the oppressors'. The centre is the statement **ושבח אני את-המתים שכבר מתו מן-החיים** in v.2 (with the word **המתים** precisely at the centre), but the conclusion is that better than both the living and the dead is the one who has not seen such oppression. There is, in retrospect, considerable irony in this 'one' being **טוב משניהם**.

The second part (vv.4-6) focuses on work, **עמל**. Again there is a close connection established between **עשה** and **עמל**. As **עשה** was used near the beginning and end of the previous part, so **עמל** is here. The centre of these verses is **הבל ורעות רוח** in v.4 (and a second occurrence of **רוח ורעות** sits rather awkwardly - in fact BHS suggests it be deleted - at the end of v.6), and the author concludes that rest is better than work. Before the centre there is a description of what the author observes, after the centre are two proverbs relating to that observation. Again there is irony in 'one handful' being better than two (**הפנים** is dual) in the second of these proverbs.

The third part (vv.7-12) also refers to work. It picks up on the word **הבל** and offers another example of what is **הבל**. The words **ושבתי אני ואראה הבל תחת השמש** in v.7 serve to introduce the passage, then v.8 sets the scene by describing 'one' person without a 'second',

directly addressing the issue of 'what is good' by asking, למי אני עמל ומחסר את-נפשי מטובה. This is taken up in v.9 where, at the very centre of this sub-section, the author states that טובים השנים מן-האחד. Over the next two and a half verses examples are given to support this statement in three lines each beginning with אם-, then a concluding line indicates that three are better still. These verses are carefully structured. Vv.10-11 follow the pattern established in v.9 of putting the positive element first, then the negative element:

<u>negative</u>	<u>positive</u>	
מן-האחד	טובים השנים	9
ואילו האחד שיפול ואין שני להקימו	אם-יפלו האחד יקים את-חברו	10
ולאחר איך יחם	אם-ישכבו שנים וחם להם	11

V.12 then reverses this trend by starting with the negative part of the sentence:

<u>negative</u>	<u>positive</u>	
השנים יעמדו נגדו	אם-יתקפו האחד	12

We have already noted that such reversals may designate the end of a passage. However, v.12 does continue the pattern of alternate ordering of האחד and השנים in each verse:

- אחד...שני in v.8
- השנים...האחד in v.9
- האחד...שני in v.10
- שנים...לאחד in v.11
- האחד...השנים in v.12

Both these features give the passage a certain roundedness which indicates deliberate structuring.

Vv.13-16 start by comparing a poor but wise youth favourably against a foolish old king. However, as the section proceeds considerable doubt is cast upon how much the one really is better than the other. In looking at 'all the people who go about under the sun', in the middle of the passage, the author realises that ultimately it makes little if any difference: the irony is that the second (השני) is actually no better than the first.

The next question to be addressed is whether or not 4:17-5:6 should be regarded as part of this section. The passage is different in a number of ways from what precedes it. Firstly, while ch.4 relates what the author saw and the conclusions drawn from these observations, 4:17-5:6 is in the second person and seems to be addressed to the reader. However, we noted



above the tendency in Qohelet for a theme to receive its final treatment in the second person, so that this might be a fitting way to close the section. This appears to be the case a number of times in the second half of the book.

Secondly, there is no first person verb from the root **ראה**, and no **טוב מן-** saying in an obviously strategic position. But there is a **טוב מן-** saying, and there is no need for the first person verb if this is a closing passage in the second person following on from the observations in the rest of the section. Also we have observed above that words and phrases tend to be used in different ways throughout Qohelet so that it should not surprise us to find the **טוב מן-** sayings in different places in the different parts of 4:1-5:6,

part one:	<b>טוב מן-</b> saying at the end
part two:	<b>טוב מן-</b> saying at the end
part three:	<b>טוב מן-</b> saying at the centre
part four:	<b>טוב מן-</b> saying at the start
part five:	<b>טוב מן-</b> saying two-thirds of the way through

Moreover, the position of this saying may be of greater significance than is immediately obvious. We should note first that it seems to be what the author sees 'under the sun' that is important in ch.4, and if we recall that the two expressions **על-הארץ** and **תחת השמים** appear to be used as synonyms for **תחת השמש**, then the statement in 5:1, **האלהים בשמים ואתה על-הארץ**, may be highly significant. There are 29 words up to this point, then a further 29 words up to the **טוב מן-** saying, **טוב אשר לא-תדר משתדור ולא תשלם**, in v.4, and finally there are 29 words from here to the clause with which the passage closes, **כי את-האלהים ירא**, in v.6. These may be the key lines in 4:17-5:6, exhorting the reader to approach God with appropriate fear and to be guarded in what one vows to him.

Thirdly, the words used here are quite different to ch.4. There is no occurrence of the words 'one' or 'two', or of a 'second' or 'both'. The key expressions **תחת השמש**, **רעות רוח** and **גם-זה הבל**, which were a feature of ch.4, are absent, and **אלהים** is used six times in 4:17-5:6 while it did not occur at all in 4:1-16. Also there are fewer perfect verbs (only one in 5:2 and one in 5:5), participles (one in 4:17), and adjectives (one in each of 4:17; 5:1,4), than in the earlier verses. By contrast, there is a higher concentration of piel verbs than anywhere else in Qohelet (5:1,1,3,3,3,4,5). Moreover, the subject matter is quite different here: the theme is clearly 'too many words before God' as is indicated by the occurrence of five words from

the root נדר which is found only here in Qohelet (5:3,3,3,4,4); four words from the root דבר (5:1,1,2,6); two references to the mouth (5:1,5); two uses of the word קול (5:2,5); and one word from the root אמר. However, each part of this section addresses a different subject, and we have already noted that the third part does not contain the key phrases found in the first, second and fourth. It would seem to be a mistake to seek a close link between the sections apart from a general discussion of different aspects of what it is better for people to do in light of their situation 'under the sun' or 'on earth'.

The structure of 4:17-5:6, seems to revolve round four exhortations in 4:17; 5:1,3,5, which we might represent thus:

שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל-בית האלהים	4:17
אל-תבהל על-פיך ולבך אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים	5:1
כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל-תאחד לשלמו	5:3
אל-תתן את-פיך לחטיא את-בשרך ואל-תאמר לפני המלאך כי שגגה היא	5:5

There appears to be a loose alternating structure here which becomes more apparent if we compare the first and third exhortations and the second and fourth:

שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל בית האלהים	4:17
כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל-תאחד לשלמו	5:3
אל-תבהל על-פיך ולבך אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים	5:1
אל-תתן את-פיך לחטיא את-בשרך ואל-תאמר לפני המלאך כי שגגה היא	5:5

Each exhortation is followed by an explanatory statement introduced by כי, and, in addition, the first and fifth exhortations are followed by a supporting sentence, and the second and third exhortations are followed by a proverb-like statement:

שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל-בית האלהים	4:17
וקרוב לשמע מתת הכסילים זבח	
כי...	
אל-תבהל על-פיך ולבך אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים	5:1
כי...	
[proverb]	5:2
כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל-תאחד לשלמו	5:3
כי...	
[proverb]	5:4
אל-תתן את-פיך לחטיא את-בשרך ואל-תאמר לפני המלאך כי שגגה היא	5:5
למה יקוף האלהים על-קולך וחבל את-המעשה ידיך	
כי...	5:6

In addition to the alternating structure, this gives us a concentric pattern thus:

exhortation + supporting sentence + explanation  
 exhortation + explanation + proverb  
 exhortation + explanation + proverb  
 exhortation + supporting sentence + explanation



We might further develop this chiasmus by observing that the second and third exhortations are restated after the explanation: אל-תבהל על-פיך ולבך אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים, in v.1 is summed up by the clause על-כן יהיו דבריך מעטים at the end of the verse; and the exhortation, כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל תאחר לשלמו, in v.3 is summed up by את אשר-תדר שלם at the end of that verse. This reveals a concentric pattern like this:

exhortation + supporting sentence + explanation  
 exhortation + explanation + restatement of exhortation + proverb  
 exhortation + explanation + restatement of exhortation + proverb  
 exhortation + supporting sentence + explanation

It may be that the concluding exhortation of these verses at the end of v.6, כי את-האלהים ירא, restates in different and more explicit words the opening exhortation in 4:17. If this is the case, the theme of the passage finishes where it starts, adding to the sense of circularity.

However, we noted above that there is also a pattern of 29 words between key phrases in the passage which conflicts somewhat with the structure we have just outlined. The tremendous intricacy of the passage and the large number of repeated words make it a prime candidate for speculation about how it is structure, and illustrates well the dangers involved in making definitive pronouncements about structure in Qohelet. To demonstrate the point further, a good case can be made out for a chiasmic structure to the passage with the exhortation כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל-תאחר לשלמו in v.3 at the centre (there are 48 words either side of the phrase, and the word לאלהים is precisely at the centre of the passage):

	A	שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל-בית האלהים
	B	וקרוב לשמע מתת הכסילים זבח
	C	כי-אינם יודעים לעשות רע
	D	אל-תבהל על-פיך ולבך אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים
	E	כי האלהים בשמים ואתה על-הארץ על-כן יהיו דבריך מעטים
	F	כי בא החלום ברב ענין וקול כסיל ברב דברים
	G	כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל-תאחר לשלמו
	F'	כי אין חפץ בסילים את אשר-תדר שלם
	E'	טוב אש לא-תדר משתדור ולא תשלם
	D'	אל-תתן את-פיך לחטיא את-בשרך ואל-תאמר לפני המלאך כי שגגה היא
	C'	למה יקצף האלהים על-קולך וחבל את-מעשה ידיך
	B'	כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים הרבה
	A'	כי את-האלהים ירא

A and A' issue the advice to 'fear God' in two different ways. B' may provide a list of things that make up 'the sacrifice of fools' in B, and these are also the two most obscure lines of the passage. C and C' see the only two words from the root עשה, and C' may be an ironic response to C: if someone does not know that they are doing wrong, why should God be angry

with them? D and D' are, as we noted above, two very similar exhortations which see the only occurrences in the passage of the word פִּיךָ. E and E' both advise caution over the use of words, while F and F' describe the fool's carelessness with words.

### 5.3 5:7-6:9, concerning wealth

The precise boundaries and structure of this section are not easy to determine<sup>9</sup>. However, to this point in Qohelet phrases relating to what the author saw 'under the sun' have played a key role in the structure of each section, and the same seems to apply here. There are three such phrases in this passage (in 5:12,17; 6:1):

יש רעה הולה ראיתי תחת השמש

הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב ... תחת השמש

יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש

These three phrases introduce three sections the first and last of which are decidedly negative and the central one of which at least initially seems positive.

The negative tone of the first part is clearly established by its opening statement, this being followed by a further three occurrences of words from the root רעע/רעה (vv.12,13,15) and two from the root חלה (vv.15,16). The word עֶשֶׂר in vv.12,13 serves only to highlight what is lost, and this is further emphasised by the phrase אֵין בִּידוֹ מְאוֹמָה in v.13, and the expanded version, מְאוֹמָה לֹא-יֵשָׁא בְעַמְלוֹ שִׁילָךְ בִּידוֹ, in the next verse. There also seem to be two allusions to death: one in v.14, עָרוֹם יָשׁוּב לִלְכַּת כְּשָׂבָא (plus שִׁילָךְ later in v.14), and one in v.15, כָּל-עֲמַת שְׂבָא כֵּן יִלָּךְ. And even the description of life in v.16 is decidedly negative: גַּם כָּל-יָמָיו בַּחֲשָׁךְ יֹאכַל וְכַעַס הָרַבָּה וְחָלְיוֹ וְקִצְףָּ.

By contrast, a positive note is struck at the beginning of the second part where רעה is replaced by טוב, and חולה is absent. Indeed, neither רעה nor חלה occurs in this part; and while עֶשֶׂר is used there is no mention of wealth being lost, and there are no allusions to death. Instead טוב appears twice (v.17,17), and there are also two references to joy (vv.18,19), and two to life (vv.17,19). In addition, there are three references to God's gift (vv.17,18,18), and

<sup>9</sup>A number of commentators regard 5:9-6:9 as a distinct section. See especially Fredericks (1989) and others whom he mentions (p.18,n.5). In his conclusion he links his findings to those of Wright, Loader and Ogden.



one further reference to God (v.19), where there were none in the previous part. There are three occurrences of the word עמל (vv.17,17,18), all in positive contexts, while there were two in the earlier verses (vv.14,15), both in negative contexts. The word אכול is used twice in a positive way (vv.17,18), while in the first part it was used once (v.16) in a negative way. Moreover, the realisation that 5:17 is one of the 'call to enjoyment' verses, also has a bearing on the way in which it is read - it should be noted that 5:17 is the only one of these verses not to use the particle of negation אין - in fact, there is not a single word in 5:17-18 which is negative. In light of this, the use in v.19 of לא, and מענה - which could be neutral or negative depending which root it is from - should be noted.

The first half of the opening verse in the third part clearly picks up on the beginning of the first part:

5:12 יש רעה חולה ראיתי תחת השמש  
6:1 יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש

The similarity between the two serves also to highlight the difference: the word חולה is replaced by אשר. אשר fulfils two purposes here, it keeps the two phrases the same length, and it also links 6:1 with 5:17:

5:12 יש רעה חולה ראיתי תחת השמש  
5:17 הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב אשר יפה  
6:1 יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש

This further emphasises the difference between what is good and beautiful, or fitting, in 5:17-19 and what is bad in the verses that follow 6:1. חלה occurs again in the third part, but it is delayed until the end of v.2. This heightens the irony of these verses. רעע/רעה is used just once more, also at the end of v.2, then the irony continues as רעה/רעע and חלה are dropped, in vv.3-6, and instead טוב is picked up from part two, but used in three different ways (vv.3,3,6), all of which are negative. We might represent the use of רעה, חלה and טוב thus:

pt.1	יש	רעה חולה ראיתי	...	לרעותו	...	רע	...	רעה חולה	...	וחליו
pt.2	הנה	אשר ראיתי אני טוב	...	וחלי רע	...	הטובה	...	טוב מן	...	וטובה לא ראה
pt.3	יש	רעה אשר ראיתי	...	וחלי רע	...	הטובה	...	טוב מן	...	וטובה לא ראה

This is one of a number of reversals in ch.6 which highlight the contrast between the 'good' in 5:17-19 and the 'bad' here. However, this might also indicate that part 3 ends with 6:2, and that 6:3-6 constitutes a fourth part of this section.

6:3-6 follows on quite logically from 6:1-2, and there is no obvious indicator - like the opening clauses of 5:12,17 and 6:1 - that a new section starts here. Moreover, what is described in these verses could well be part of the situation that is described as רעה in 6:1. However, neither רעה/רעע nor חלה is used in these verses, while טוב occurs three times. Also we are introduced to 'a man' without any clear indication whether this man is the same one whose situation was described in 6:2. There is no doubt that the theme of 6:3-6 is closely linked to the theme of 'inability to enjoy what God gives' in vv.1-2, but the structure of the section is more balanced if these verses are considered as a separate part. Moreover, the particular focus of vv.1-2 was that *God* does not give the ability to enjoy the things *he* gives; in vv.3-6 the focus is on the man himself who lacks this ability.

Besides reversing certain themes from 5:17-19 (which will be considered in more depth later), 6:3-6 runs parallel in certain respects to 5:12-16. Both focus on a person who is unable to enjoy his/her wealth; both refer to children; both allude to birth and death; and both refer to darkness. However, 6:3-6 represents a development from the earlier passage, which itself develops from 4:8. 4:8 refers to a person who עיניו לא-תשבע עשר, then proceeds to ask the question, עשר. ענין רע. ולמי אני עמל ומחסר את-נפשי מטובה. This situation is described as עשר. ענין רע. עשר. ענין רע are all used in 5:12-16, and ונפשו לא-תשבע מן-טובה occurs in 6:3. The problem in 4:8 is that the person described has no children to whom (s)he can leave his/her wealth. In 5:12-16 the person under consideration does seem to have children, but loses all his/her wealth. In 6:3-6 the man (sic) has both wealth and children (and a long life to boot), but still gains no satisfaction from his wealth.

So far we have examined four parts of this section, all of which deal in different ways with work and wealth. 5:9-11 also fits within this general theme, and although it comes before the first verse which uses ראייתי תחת השמש, it may also be part of the same section. We noted earlier that ראייתי is an important indicator of the structure of sections in the first half of the book, but it should not surprise us to find it used in a different way here to the way it was used in the earlier chapters. If 5:9-11 is to be included in this section, not only is ראייתי not found near the beginning, but there is no first person verb at all in the first part, nor is the



phrase **תחת השמש** used. However, the use of **ראיתי** and **השמש** does still help to define the structure of the section<sup>10</sup>:

part 1:	5:9-11		(38 words)
part 2:	5:12-16	opens with <b>יש רעה חולה ראיתי תחת השמש</b> closes with <b>וחליו וקצף</b>	(57 words)
part 3:	5:17-19	opens with <b>הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב ... תחת השמש</b> closes with <b>שמחה לבו</b>	(59 words)
part 4:	6:1-2	opens with <b>יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש</b> closes with <b>וחלי רע הוא</b>	(38 words)
part 5:	6:3-6		(56 words)

That 5:9-11 is concerned with wealth is clear from the words used: **רבה/רבה** three times (vv.10,10,11); **כסף** twice (v.9,9); **אכל** twice (vv.10,11); **שבע** twice (vv.9,11); **בהמון** once (v.9); **תבואה** once (v.9); **כשרון** once (v.10); and **עשיר** once (v.11). Thus over one third of all the words in these verses are directly connected with wealth. The question **מה-כשרון לבעליה** in v.10 lies at the centre of the passage and is surrounded by statements which suggest that wealth brings its owner little success or gain. These statements are set against each other on opposite sides of the centre in chiasmic fashion<sup>11</sup>:

A	the lover of money gains no <u>satisfaction</u> from money	(5 words)
B	the lover of abundance is not satisfied with his produce	(8 words)
C	when goods increase those who enjoy them increase	(4 words)
D	but what gain is there for their owner?	(3 words)
C'	except to see them with his eyes	(4 words)
B'	the labourer sleeps well whether he has much or little to eat	(8 words)
A'	but the <u>satisfaction</u> of the rich does not allow him to sleep	(6 words)

A and A' are ironic: the same root is used for the 'satisfaction' that eludes the lover of money, and the surfeit of the rich that prevents them from sleeping. B and B' set the lover of abundance, who is never satisfied however much he obtains, against the labourer who sleeps well regardless of how much (s)he has. C refers to the many people who benefit when goods increase, while C' suggests that the only benefit for their owner (who presumably is also the 'lover' of money and abundance) is to look at all (s)he has obtained.

<sup>10</sup>Compare the structure proposed by Fredericks (1989:19) who divides the passage at the same points, but finds a different chiasmic pattern.

<sup>11</sup>Fredericks (1989:24) notes this structure to 5:11:

- A Quality of sleep
- B The laborer,
- C Amount of consumption,
- C' Amount of consumption,
- B' The rich man,
- A' Quality of sleep.

A and B (= v.9) are concerned with the futility of loving wealth. This is captured by the repetition of both אהב and כסף, and also by the word המון. C, D and C' (= v.10) focus on the gain to be had from much wealth. The repeated רבב is important, as is the word כשרון. B' and A' (= v.11) are concerned with the mundane business of sleeping, which as a basic human necessity contrasts with the emphasis on great wealth in the earlier verses. The root ישן is used twice in this verse, the second time it bears the ין- ending which seems to be characteristic of key words in this passage (see also יתרון in v.8<sup>12</sup>). In addition, this final verse also picks up the root שבע from v.9 and רבב/רבה and אכל from v.10, and in this way serves to draw all three verses to a conclusion.

It may be that 5:9-11 constitutes an introduction to the section on wealth from 5:9-6:6. The general theme of wealth commences in these verses and a number of words which feature later are introduced here. Reference to not finding satisfaction in wealth is found in this part (לא-ישבע, v.9) and also in the final one (לא-תשבע, 6:3). The word טוב(ה) appears once in the first part, twice in the third and three times in the fifth. By contrast, רעע/רעה is used only in the second and fourth parts: four times and twice respectively. This might appear to indicate an increase in the 'good' and a decrease in the 'bad' throughout the section, but there are two counter-arguments to such a suggestion. Firstly, the three occurrences of טוב in the last part are all in negative contexts; and secondly, the word is used in different ways, and on the four occasion the feminine form occurs it may be used as a synonym for עשר. אכל is another important word introduced in these verses: it is used twice here, once in the second part, and twice in the third and fourth parts. Like טוב it bears more than one meaning in this section: it may refer to the mundane business of eating, or to the enjoyment of one's wealth. The owner of wealth, בעל, seems to be the subject of 5:9-11; and the watching of his/her wealth referred to in v.10 may be the basis for the clause שמור לבעליו לרעתו in v.12. In fact, neither אדם nor איש appears in 5:9-11 or 5:12-16, so that the 'owner of wealth' may be the subject of both passages. However, in 5:17-19 כל-האדם is the subject, while in 6:2 and 6:3-6 it is איש.

It seems that in 5:9-6:6 we find five closely inter-related passages which address the subject of wealth in five different ways. The first two have the owner of wealth as their sub-

<sup>12</sup>Fredericks (1989:21) notes that 'the synonymy of *kaser* and *yatar* in this instance is accepted by most.' See his note 9.



ject: part 1 discussing the situation where a person has wealth but gains no pleasure from it, and part 2 considering the instance of a person who loses the wealth (s)he had. The middle part then takes a positive perspective on wealth, viewing it as a gift from God to be enjoyed - providing he enables one to do so. Its subject is humankind in general. The final two parts have as their subject a particular individual who is not able to enjoy his (sic) wealth. Part 4 describes all that God has given him, but notes that this does not include the ability to enjoy it all, and in fact it is a stranger who reaps the benefits of it. Part 5 then goes on to show the futility of his life, stating that he would have been better to be stillborn.

In light of these considerations we might reconstruct our diagram for this section:

- |   |          |          |
|---|----------|----------|
| 1) The owner of wealth  |          |          |
| i) who gains no satisfaction from it  | 38 words |          |
| ii) who loses it all in a bad deal  | 57 words |          |
|   |          | 95 words |
| 2) People in general can enjoy the wealth given by God when enabled by him to do so |          |          |
|   |          | 59 words |
| 3) The case of a man  |          |          |
| i) who is unable to enjoy his wealth and loses it to another                        | 38 words |          |
| ii) who gains no satisfaction from his wealth and would be better not to have lived | 56 words |          |
|   |          | 94 words |

Where the 'call to enjoyment' came towards the end of chs.2,3, it is the central part of this section. The passages either side all deal with a person who has wealth, but for some reason is unable to enjoy it. These passages may be viewed as a chiasmus because in both 5:12-16 and 6:1-2 the wealth is lost and in both 5:9-11 and 6:3-6 the wealth seems to be retained, but its owner still does not enjoy it:

A	wealth not enjoyed by its owner	┌	95 words
B	wealth lost		
C	wealth as a gift from God	-	59 words
B'	wealth lost	└	94 words
A'	wealth not enjoyed by its owner		

But the section also develops in a linear fashion:

- 1) wealth brings no gain to its owner
- 2) and is easily lost
- 3) when one has it, it should be enjoyed and accepted as a gift from God
- 4) but God may give wealth and not give the ability to enjoy it
- 5) in this case it would be better never to have lived at all

And there is an alternating pattern as well<sup>13</sup>:

<sup>13</sup>Fredericks (1989) also proposes *both* a chiasmic and parallel structure to this passage.

introduction	38 words
what is רע about wealth	57 words
what is טוב about wealth	
what is רע about wealth	38 words
what is not טוב about wealth	56 words

How, then, do 5:7-8 and 6:7-9 fit into this section? 5:7-8 does not explicitly address the issue of wealth, and seems to fit poorly with 5:9-6:6. Nor does it seem to tie in particularly well with the verses that precede it which are concerned with the foolishness of too much or inappropriate speech. However, the first part of v.7 is in the second person, as also is 4:17-5:6, and the verb תראה might be an appropriate ending to the structure we noted in 4:1-5:6:

ואראה	4:1
טוב ... מ-	4:3
וראיתי	4:4
טוב ... מ-	4:6
ואראה	4:7
טובים ... מן-	4:9
טוב ... מ-	4:13
ראיתי	4:15
טוב ... מ-	5:4
תראה	5:7

The beginning of v.7 seems also to hark back to the start of ch.4, so that although it does not follow on well from what immediately precedes it, it may serve as an appropriate conclusion to a section running from 4:1-5:8.

However, v.8 seems to fit better with 5:9-11 than with the immediately preceding passage, 4:17-5:6, or the larger section, 4:1-5:6. Firstly, the word יתרון bears the -ון ending which appears in key words in each of v.9 (המון), v.10 (כשרון) and v.11 (ישון). Indeed, there would be a certain irony in a passage beginning with the word יתרון which considers the advantages (or lack of advantages) that wealth brings, then concludes that the labourer's advantage is that he sleeps well - the passage ending with the word ישון. Secondly, the words יתרון and לשדה נעבד are appropriate in a passage which discusses abundant produce and much eating. Also if the king is the one who sees abundance, the statement ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה in v.10 makes sense because he could distribute the plentiful goods among his subjects, and there truly would be advantage for the (people of the) land.



Perhaps in view of these observations, it might be that 5:7-8 is not part of either passage, but serves as a link between them.

6:7 fits the theme of 5:9-6:6, but it does not follow logically from 6:1-2,3-6. These verses came to a conclusion in 6:6, and v.7 goes back a stage from this conclusion. Moreover, it is **הָאָדָם** who features in v.7, rather than **אִישׁ** as in 6:1-6, and the word for work, **עָמַל**, has not occurred since 5:18. It may be, then, that 6:7 is designed to pick up on the theme of 5:9-6:6, and introduce the conclusion to the first half of the book.

6:7-9 makes a number of allusions to the first half of the book. V.7 may provide a direct answer to the question in 1:3 which is twice repeated in a slightly different form:

יַעֲמַל תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ	בְּכָל-עֵמָלוֹ	מִה-יִתְרוֹן לָאָדָם	1:3
עֵמָל	אֲשֶׁר הוּא	מִה-יִתְרוֹן הָעוֹשֶׂה	3:9
לְרוּחַ	יַעֲמַל	מִה-יִתְרוֹן לוֹ	5:15
כָּל-עֵמָל הָאָדָם לִפְנֵיהוּ וְגַם-הַנֶּפֶשׁ לֹא תִמְלֹא			6:7

It may be significant that there are 641 words between 1:3 and 3:9 and exactly the same number from 3:9 to 5:15. Thus there are the same number of words from the end of the first question to the beginning of the second as there are from the beginning of the second to the end of the third<sup>14</sup>.

Working for one's mouth probably means that one works to eat. The verb **אָכַל** is an important element in the discussion of wealth in 5:9-6:6 where it refers both to eating and enjoying. **אָכַל** is also a key element in the 'call to enjoyment' verses. Working to provide food is, of course, an endless task as the appetite for food continually returns and in this sense a person's appetite is never 'filled'. However, in 4:17-5:6, and everywhere else in Qohelet where the word **פִּה** is used (8:2; 10:12,13), it is connected with speech. If a person works so that (s)he can boast about his/her wealth, this too could be a desire which is never fulfilled. The verse might also be translated, 'All of a person's profit goes to his/her mouth', which again could be translated either way.

V.8 also alludes to the question in 1:3; 3:9; 5:15, because it opens, **כִּי מִה-יֹתֵר**... However, it is noteworthy that the question takes a different form. **מִה-יֹתֵר לְחָכָם מִן-כֶּסֶּל**

<sup>14</sup>It should perhaps be pointed out that this is not really a comparison of equals because there are 641 words *between* 1:3 and 3:9, while there are 641 words *from* 3:9 to 5:15 including both verses.

relates to a subject which has not been considered since the end of 1:4-2:26. In 2:13 we read, יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות כיתרון האור מן-חשך, but 6:8 seems to cast some doubt on this assertion.

The טוב מן- saying in v.9 recalls 4:1-5:6 whose overall theme is ‘what is better’. It also ties in with the theme of ‘what is seen’ which is a major aspect of the whole of the first half of Qohelet. The final part of the verse is a recurring phrase from the first half of the book which is not used again, גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח.

The conclusion to the first half of the book seems then to be that work brings no satisfaction, wisdom gives no advantage, nor does knowledge of how to conduct your life. The better way is to be happy with what you can see, but even this is *hebel*, and like chasing the wind.

The phrase גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח is, as we noted previously, the exact centre of the book. If it is removed from our word count, then the structure of 5:7-6:9 may be represented thus:

Introduction		26 words
1) The owner of wealth		
i) who gains no satisfaction from it	38 words	
ii) who loses it all in a bad deal	57 words	
		95 words
2) People in general can enjoy the wealth given by God when enabled by him to do so		
		59 words
3) The case of a man		
i) who is unable to enjoy his wealth and loses it to another	38 words	
ii) who gains no satisfaction from his wealth and would be better not to have lived	56 words	
		94 words
Conclusion		25 words

5.4            6:10-12, introduction to the second half of Qohelet

These verses continue to hark back to themes from the first half of Qohelet, but also anticipate themes from the second half. The first part of v.10 recalls similar sentiments in 1:9 and 3:15, though again each verse expresses these differently:



מה-שהיה	הוא שיהיה	1:9
מה-שהיה כבר	הוא	3:15
מה-שהיה כבר	נקרא שמו	6:10

Thus our passage begins by looking back not only to the first half of the book, but also at ‘what is’ or ‘what has been’. By contrast, it ends by looking forward to a major theme of the second half of the book, and also to ‘what will be’, with words which are part of the thread of verses about human inability to know the future, *מי-יגיד לאדם מה-יהיה אחריו תחת השמש*. The second part of v.10 states that it is known what ‘man’ is. Again there is a contrast in the final verse where the question is asked, *מי יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי-חיי הבלו ויעשם כצל*. This anticipates the theme of ‘what is and is not known’, which is an important aspect of the second half of the book. It also links back to 4:1-5:6 and forward to 7:1-8:7, both of which consider what is ‘good’ or ‘better’.

There is thus a chiasmus in 6:10-12 whereby a statement about what has been, followed by one about what is known, are contrasted to a question about knowing followed by one about what will be - these perhaps being rhetorical questions expecting the answer ‘no-one’. The chiasmus revolves round the clause that is at the centre of the passage, *מה-יתר לאדם*,

A	what has been
B	is known
C	what advantage to people?
B'	who/nobody knows
A'	what will be?

This serves well as a link between the main thrust of the first half, and the developing focus of the second. The first half is more pre-occupied with observation of what takes place, and especially what is done, under the sun, and seeks to find out what advantage it brings, and what good there is in it. The second half moves to a greater emphasis on the future, and human inability to know what will happen. One way in which this is evidenced is by the use of perfect verbs 121 times in the first half compared to 86 times in the second, while the imperfect occurs 90 times in the first half and 134 times in the second<sup>15</sup>. It should be noted, however, that these are *trends* in the two halves, neither observation of what is done nor anticipation of the future being the sole focus of one half, nor being restricted to one half.

<sup>15</sup>The perfect form of the verb *היה* occurs twice as often in the first half (16-8), but the imperfect is used the same number of times in each half (10 times).

Nonetheless, consideration of the future starts immediately in 7:1-8, an unambiguous reference to death appearing in v.1, and a more ambiguous reference occurring in v.8.

The first half of 6:10 implies that by naming what has been control has been gained over it, but the end of v.12 seems to suggest that a person has no control over what will be in the future. The next part of v.10 implies that one can know what a 'person' is, but the first half of v.12 suggests that we still do not know what is good for him or her.

The last part of v.10 and v.11 seem to look back to 4:17-5:6 and forward to 8:1-7, both of these passages focusing on the use of words. 4:17-5:6 discusses the use of words before God, 8:1-7 refers to words spoken by or to a king: the 'one who is stronger than he' in 6:11 could refer to either.

The question **מה-יתר לאדם**, besides recalling similar questions in 1:3; 3:9; 5:15 and 6:8, also means that 'many words' is another thing to be added to the list of things in 6:7-9 which do not bring any advantage.

V.12 contains two balanced questions which together comprehensively cover any possible arena in which people might gain an advantage:

מי-יודע	מה-טוב	לאדם בחיים
מי-יגיד לאדם	מה-יהיה	אחריו

The first asks who knows what is good for a person during her or his life, the second asks who knows what will happen afterwards. Both of these are key questions in Qohelet, and both occur in the first and second halves of the book. However, they serve well to introduce the second half of the book where there is a particular focus on what is known and not known. Also the question about what is good for people leads well into ch.7.

## 5.5 7:1-8:8

### 5.5.1 7:1-15a, what is good or better

We suggested above that 7:1-15a may divide into two equal halves of 78 words each, vv.1-8 and vv.9-15a<sup>16</sup>. 7:1-8 is distinguished from the sections before and after by the total

<sup>16</sup>But see Gordis (1943), who proposes that in 7:1-14 'we have here a prose heptad, a collection of seven utterances, each beginning with *tobh* (vv.1,2,3,5,8,9 (*tobhah*),14(*beyom tobhah*)).' This does not necessarily conflict with our proposal. Murphy (1974:79) states, 'In 7:14,24,28 there occurs the key phrase, "not find out/who can find out," which can be considered as delimiting three sections with the chapter: 1-14,15-24,25-29.' But he divides 7:1-14 quite differently: 1-6a,6b,7-12,13-14.



absence of perfect verbs. It is defined as a unit by the inclusio of two short -טוב מן- sayings in vv.1,8, which, in contrast to vv.2-7, are not followed by an explanation. There is also an inclusio in the second half of v.1 where specific reference is made to death and birth, and the first half of v.8 where allusion may be made to death and birth:

proverb		משמן טוב	טוב שם	(1)
proverb	(inclusio)	מיום הולדו	(טוב) יום המות	
proverb		טוב ללכת אל-בית-אבל	טוב ללכת אל-בית-אבל	(2a)
explanation		באשר הוא סוף כל-האדם והחי יתן אל-לבי		(2b)
proverb		משחק	טוב כעס	(3)
explanation			כי ברע פנים ייטב לב	
explanation		לב חכמים בבית אבל ולב כסילים בבית שמחה		(4)
proverb		טוב לשמע גערת חכם	טוב לשמע גערת חכם	(5)
explanation		כי כקול הסירים תחת הסיר כן שחק הכסיל וגם-זה הבל	כי כקול הסירים תחת הסיר כן שחק הכסיל וגם-זה הבל	(6)
explanation		כי העשק יהולל חכם ויאבד את-לב מתנה	כי העשק יהולל חכם ויאבד את-לב מתנה	(7)
proverb	(inclusio)	מראשיתו	טוב אחרית דבר	(8)
proverb		מגבה-רוח	טוב ארך-רוח	

The clause **לב כסילים בבית שמחה** in v.4 is at the centre of the passage.

There seem to be two particular themes in 7:1-8. The major one concerns death. If references to death occur at the beginning and the end of the passage, **בית-אבל** in vv.2,4, and **רע פנים** and **כעס** in v.3 may refer to the same theme. In retrospect we might also see **משמן** as an allusion to embalming ointment. The overall impression is that it is better to concentrate on one's death than on birth. V.4 affirms that this is what the wise do, while the foolish occupy themselves with pleasure. This introduces the second theme which compares wisdom against folly. However, this may be subsidiary to the first: it is better to pay attention to the wise because their minds are focused on death while fools concentrate on enjoying themselves.

The first half of 7:9-14 picks up the themes of the second half of 7:1-8 in reverse order, but instead of focusing on death in the second half, to correspond to the first half of vv.1-8, it turns to the deeds of God:

- A death better than birth (vv.1-4)
- B wisdom better than folly (vv.4-7)
- C end better than beginning (v.8a)
- D patient spirit better than haughty spirit (v.8b)
- D' do not quickly become angry in your spirit (v.9)
- C' do not ask why the earlier days were better (v.10)
- B' wisdom is an advantage (vv.11-12)
- A consider God's deeds (vv.13-14)

This recalls 3:9-22 which focused on God's deeds in the first half and death in the second.

That passage ended in similar vein to this one:

the future	he does not know	because	
במה שיהיה אחריו	מי יביאנו לראות	כי	3:22
אחריו מאומה	שלא ימצא האדם	על-דברת	7:14

There is a further chiasmus in vv.13-14 revolving around v.14a:

ראה את-מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו  
 ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה  
 ראה גם את-זה לעמת-זה עשה האלהים

This could be further expanded thus:

ראה את-מעשה האלהים  
 כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו  
 ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה  
 ראה גם את-זה לעמת-זה  
 עשה האלהים

In terms both of the structure and the thematic development of these verses, it may be that ראה should be attached to the end of the third line (as indicated by the *athnah*), and if this is done the chiasmus is also clearly pictured in the physical appearance of the lines which build up to the centre, and then accelerate away from it:

ראה את-מעשה האלהים  
 כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו  
 ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה  
 גם את-זה לעמת-זה  
 עשה האלהים

The theme of each line might then be represented thus:

- A The work of God
- B cannot be altered.
- C Wordplay on טוב and רעה:
- B' both are alike
- A' the work of God.

This gives a clear indication of the all-encompassing work of God which cannot be altered, either the good or the bad, and leaves at the centre the ambiguity over what precisely does constitute the 'good'.



את-הכל ראיתי בימי הבלי in 7:15a could be read with v.14 and translated, 'I have seen both of these during the days of my *hebel*'. Alternatively, it could be read as an introduction to the next section, 'During my days of *hebel* I have seen both (of the following situations)'.

### 5.5.2 7:15b-22, on righteousness and wickedness

It may be that this section continues the discussion about what is 'good', only this time in the second person. The word טוב occurs twice (vv.18,20), once in each half of the section: indeed, טוב is the 29th word from the beginning, and also the 29th word from the end (with 30 words between the two occurrences). It may also be that צדק, and perhaps even חכם, are used as synonyms for, or examples of, טוב, while רשע, הטא and perhaps סכל are used as synonyms for, or examples of, רעה. צדק occurs four times (vv.15,15,16,20); חכם three times (vv.16,19,19); רעה once (v.15); רשע twice (vv.15,16); חטא once (v.20); and סכל once (v.20).

The section divides into two equal parts of 43 words each. Both parts start with two statements which are followed by advice offered in the form of negative second person imperfect exhortations, then both close with an explanatory line beginning with כי:

דיק אבד בצדקו	statement 1
ויש רשע מאריך ברעתו	statement 2
אל-תהי צדיק הרבה ואל-תתחכם יותר למה תשומם	
אל-תרשע הרבה ואל-תהי סכל למה תמות בלא עתך	advice
טוב אשר תאחזו בזה וגם-מזה אל-תנח את-ידיך	
כי-ירא אלהים יצא את-כלם	explanation
החכמה תעז לחכם מעשרה שליטים אשר היו בעיר	statement 1
כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא	statement 2
גם לכל-הדברים אשר ידברו אל-תתן לבך	
אשר לא-תשמע את-עבדך מקללך	advice
כי גם-פעמים רבות ידע לבך אשר גם-את קללת אחרים	explanation

We have examined the section 7:15b-22 in two halves of 43 words each, but it might be viewed in another way which treats the passage as a whole. It commences in v.15b with the description in two apparently balanced halves of a situation which the author has seen. This prompts four admonitions, which at least initially appear to be in parallel. These are then followed by three responses, each of which is backed up by a statement starting with כי, and which increase in length towards the end of the passage. In this case the word גם at the beginning of vv.21,22 might serve in effect to mark the end of the series of responses. The

first response asserts what is 'good' in reaction to the admonitions, but despite a positive start to the second response, it and the third argue that nobody is 'good' anyway. Indeed, the statement in v.20 that **אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא** is the precise centre of the three responses (25 words, 82 letters before; 25 words, 82 letters after), and up to this point the sentiments are positive, after it they are negative, so that this statement is the turning point:

the situation  
**יש צדיק אבד בצדקו ויש רשע מאריך ברעתו**

4 exhortations  
**אל-תהי צדיק הרבה  
ואל-תתחכם יותר למה תשומם  
אל-תרשע הרבה  
ואל-תהי סכל למה תמות בלא עתך**

first response  
**טוב אשר תאחוז בזה וגם-מזה אל-תנח את-ידך  
כי-ירא אלהים יצא את-כלם**

second response  
**החכמה תעז לזככם מעשרה שליטים אשר היו בעיר  
כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא**

third response  
**גם לכל-הדברים אשר ידברו אל-תתן לבך אשר לא-תשמע את-עבדך מקללך  
כי גם-פעמים רבות ידע לבך אשר גם-את קללת אחרים**

### 5.5.3 7:23-29, on what can and cannot be found

This is another passage the start of which is difficult to determine. **כל-זה נסיתי בחכמה**, with which v.23 begins, might refer back to the discussion of righteousness and wickedness in 7:15-22. In this case, when the author says, **אמרתי אחכמה והיא רחוקה ממני**, in the second half of the verse, it may be the wisdom which gives 'more strength than ten rules' in v.19 that is alluded to. V.23 might then refer to the difficulty of finding out what is 'good' - particularly with reference to righteousness, wickedness, wisdom and folly. On the other hand, these verses see a return to first person usage, which continues until the end of the chapter. Moreover, the notion of things being 'far from me', 'far off' and 'deep', and particularly the question with which v.24 ends, **מי ימצאנו**, serve as a good introduction to the following passage on 'finding' and 'not finding'. However, the expression **סבותי אני** at the beginning of v.25 suggests that a new section starts here. It also seems that the two new elements in this introduc-



tion, **בִּקֵּשׁ** and **חֲשׁוֹבֹן**, form an inclusio to the passage because they appear also at the end of v.29. Perhaps then 7:23-24 serves as a linking passage between vv.15b-22 and vv.25-29.

The key word in 7:25-29 is **מֵצָא** which appears seven times. Its use is particularly concentrated from v.27 to the first half of v.29, and in v.28 and the first half of v.29 there is an alternating pattern of **מֵצָא** and **לֹא-מֵצָא** such that it is difficult to tell what has been found and what has not. This alternating pattern is set between the two occurrences of the word **אֲשֶׁר** which in turn are set between an introduction and a conclusion of nine words each:

ראה זה מצאתי אמרה קהלת אחת לאחת למצא חשבון	v.27
אשר	v.28
עוד-בקשה נפשי ולא מצאתי	
אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי	
ואשה בכל-אלה לא מצאתי	
לבד ראה-זה מצאתי	v.29
אשר	
עשה האלהים את-האדם ישר והמה בקשו חשבנות רבים	

The introduction declares that Qohelet set out to find **חֲשׁוֹבֹן**, which might mean something like 'answer' or 'solution'. The middle section then indicates that some things were found and others not. The conclusion indicates that the search continues regardless, but it is not clear whether this is considered a good thing or not.

There is a similar pattern in v.26 to the one in vv.27-29. An introduction explaining one thing that the author finds is followed by three illustrations and by a conclusion which introduces God into the discussion:

ומוצא אני מר ממות את-האשה אשר  
 היא מצודים  
 וחרמים לבה  
 אסורים ידיה  
 טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה וחוטא ילכד בה

V.25 consists of an introduction clause followed by two parallel clauses of equal length, the first of which seems positive and the second negative:

סבותי אני ולבי  
 לדעת ולתור ובקש חכמה וחשבון  
 ולדעת רשע כסל והסכלות הוללות

#### 5.5.4 8:1-8, on interpreting words, or things

The previous section focused on what Qohelet found and did not find. This passage starts with a question asking, 'who knows the interpretation of a word/thing?'. In v.5 there is

one occurrence each of **יָדַע** and **לֹא יָדַע**, and v.7 states that **אֵינָנוּ יָדָע**. Thus what is and is not known is an important aspect of these verses, with the verb **יָדַע** being used four times, in a different way each time:

יָדַע	מִי	v.1
יָדַע	לֹא	v.5a
יָדַע		v.5b
יָדַע	אֵינָנוּ	v.7

If the first is a rhetorical question expecting the answer ‘no-one’, three out of the four are concerned with ‘not knowing’ and only one with what is known. We might also note that two of the four occurrences of **יָדַע** are closely associated with **חָכָם**.

Speech seems to be the main theme of the first half of the passage: indeed, the expression **דָּבַר רַע** occurs precisely in the middle of the passage which means that the final occurrences of **דָּבַר** is the last word of the first half. **דָּבַר** is used five times (vv.1,2,3,4,5) - its highest concentration in the book; the phrase **מִי יֹאמַר-לוֹ** is used once (v.4), and **פִּי-מֶלֶךְ** in v.2 may be synonymous with **דָּבַר-מֶלֶךְ** in v.4. However, **דָּבַר** is used in different ways in these verses, and it is not always clear what it means. In v.1 it could be rendered either ‘word’ or ‘thing’, and similarly in the two occurrences of the expression **דָּבַר רַע** (vv.2,5). **דָּבַר מֶלֶךְ** in v.4 probably means ‘the king’s word’, and in v.3 **דָּבַר** is used in the phrase **עַל דְּבַרְתָּ**, ‘on account of’. The question in 8:1, **מִי יוֹדַע פֶּשֶׁר דָּבַר**, is, then, highly appropriate to this passage where we cannot even be sure how to interpret the word **דָּבַר** in that question!

‘Death’ seems to be the theme of the second half, although it is only explicitly referred to in the expression **יוֹם הַמּוֹת** in the final verse - which means that this expression occurs in Qohelet only in the first and last verses of the section 7:1-8:8, so that this part of the book is enclosed by references to death. The two occurrences of the expression **וַעַת וּמִשְׁפָּט** may also allude to death, in which case the statement **וַעַת וּמִשְׁפָּט יָדַע לֵב חָכָם** in v.5 should perhaps be related to **לֵב חֲכָמִים בְּבֵית אָבִל** in 7:4. **כִּי-דָרַעַת הָאָדָם רַבָּה עָלָיו** at the end of v.6 might also allude to death, as may the two references to ‘what will be’ in v.7. Finally the four statements beginning with **אֵין/לֹא** in v.8 could all assert that people have no control over the day of their death, one explicitly and the others obliquely. Explicit mention of death being held to the last verse increases the suspense and sends the reader back to the earlier verses to see if this new factor affects the interpretation of other words.



8:6-8 is made up of four clauses beginning with **כי**, followed by three starting with **אין** and one with **לא**. However, the third **כי** clause has **איננו** as the next word, so that the two series intertwine. The effect is that the statement **ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם** in v.5 is followed by four supporting statements, four negative concluding statements starting with **אין**, and a final conclusion introduced by the word **לא**<sup>17</sup>:

ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם  
...כי  
...כי  
כי איננו...  
...כי  
...אין  
...ואין  
...ואין  
...לא

8:1-8 is another passage which is distinguished from the sections either side by the absence of perfect verbs. Moreover, there are first person verbs and suffixes just before and after it, but none here. Instead we find second person verbs in 8:3,4.

## 5.6 8:9-9:10

The key word in this section is **עשה**. The root is used twenty times (8:9,9,10,11,11, 11,12,14,14,14,16,17,17,17; 9:3,6,7,10,10,10), that is an average of once per verse. Nowhere else in Qohelet is there so high a concentration of words from this root.

The section falls into two halves of approximately the same length, 8:9-17 (186 words), and 9:1-10 (189 words). The two halves are constructed in a similar fashion. The opening of 8:9 and 9:1 bear a striking resemblance:

8:9	את-כל-זה ראיתי ונתון את לבי
9:1	כי את-כל-זה נתתי אל-לבי

Typical of Qohelet, there are differences between the two, but it is notable that the expression **את-כל-זה** occurs in Qohelet only in these two verses. Both halves can then be further divided into two parts, and in both cases the second part opens with a verse (8:15 and 9:9) that issues the 'call to enjoyment'. The end of the first part of 8:9-17 concludes in v.14 with three statements beginning with **יש**, while the end of the first part of 9:1-10 concludes in vv.5,6 with

<sup>17</sup>9:1-6 also ends with three lines starting with **יש**, and three lines including the word **אין**. In addition, 9:6 starts with three words each preceded by **ואין**.

three statements using the word אין. Moreover, לב בני-האדם בהם לעשות רע in 8:11 occurs just before the centre of 8:9-14 (the precise centre of the passage רע אשר חטא עשה רע), and this is picked up at the centre of 9:1-6 in the clause in v.3, וגם לב בני-האדם מלא-רע.

5.6.1 8:9-14, the evil that is done under the sun

That 8:9-14 focuses on *evil* deeds is clear from the use of ten words from the root עשה (vv.9,9,10,11,11,11,12,14,14,14), plus four from the root רשע (vv.10,13,14,14), four from the roots רעה/רעה (vv.9,11,11,12), and one from the root חטא (v.12). Indeed, there is one word connected with ‘evil’ in each of vv.9,10, and two in each of vv.11,12,13,14. The phrase רע אשר חטא עשה רע is precisely at the centre of the passage, with 52 words either side.

It might be noted that 8:9-14 shares with 2:11-19 and 3:9-22 the form of argument which proceeds from ‘I saw’ to ‘I knew’ to ‘I said’:

8:9-14	3:9-22	2:11-19
ראיתי		לראות
ראיתי	ראיתי	וראיתי
יודע אני	ידעתי	וידעתי
	ידעתי	
	ראיתי	
אמרתי	אמרתי	ואמרתי
	אמרתי	ודברתי

Only in 2:15 and 8:14 does Qohelet actually *say*, ‘this is *hebel*’, but this is expressed slightly differently in the two verses:

ודברתי בלבי	שגם-זה הבל	2:15
אמרתי	שגם-זה הבל	8:14

2:15 sees the first of thirteen occurrences of גם-זה הבל, and 8:14 sees the last.

The *observation* in 8:9-14 is all in the first half of the passage. After the introduction, את-כל-זה ראיתי ונתון את-לבי לכל-מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש, there are two observations of 23 words each (vv.9b-10,11-12a) concerning evil deeds that prevail unfairly. The expression גם-זה הבל at the end of the first of these could apply to both. The second half opens with the statement גם-יודע אני אשר אמרתי שגם-זה הבל. It consists of two parts of 24 words each, both of which compare the ‘righteous’ and the ‘wicked’ in balanced lines. However, the balance is upset by the clause in the middle of v.13,



v.12b יהיה-טוב ליראי האלהים  
v.13 וטוב לא-יהיה לרשע ולא-יארץ ימים בצל אשר אשר איננו יראו ירא מלפניו מלפני אלהים

And also by the shortened form of אשר in v.14,

יש צדיקים אשר מגיע אלהם כמעשה הרשעים  
יש רשעים ש- מגיע אלהם כמעשה הצדיקים

V.14 also contains an introduction and conclusion both of which use the word הבל, so that, in Crenshaw's words (1988:156), 'The idea of *hebel* encloses the entire verse.' It forms an inclusio in a similar way that the phrase הבל הכל הבל does for the book as a whole:

יש-הבל אשר נעשה על-הארץ אשר  
יש צדיקים אשר מגיע אלהם כמעשה הרשעים  
יש רשעים ש- מגיע אלהם כמעשה הצדיקים  
אמרתי שגם-זה הבל

5.6.2 8:15-17, the mystery of what is done on earth/under the sun

This passage forms the conclusion to 8:9-17. These verses display a structure which revolves round the occurrences of the (presumably) synonymous expressions תחת השמש and על-הארץ:

v.9 מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש  
v.14 אשר נעשה על-הארץ  
v.15 תחת השמש  
v.15 תחת השמש  
v.16 אשר נעשה על-הארץ  
v.17 מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש

There is a development from the study of evil deeds committed under the sun in vv.9-14, to the statement in v.15 that 'there is nothing *good* for people under the sun except...', which then leads to consideration of what God gives under the sun, before turning finally to note that however much one studies what is done under the sun, a person is not able to find out all that God does. However, this neat pattern hides the fact that after a fairly extended discussion of 'evil deeds' in vv.9-14, the pace accelerates considerably from v.15 so that there is a rapid move to the conclusion in v.17, drawing in a number of themes from earlier in the book on the way. Moreover, vv.15-17 exhibit some differences from the earlier verses. There is clearly still a focus on what is done under the sun, but references to 'evil' disappear, and where the root עשה is used exclusively in 8:9-14 for what is done, עמל appears in vv.15,17. It may be

used as a synonymous term, but it has not occurred since 6:7, and appears again only in 9:9,9; 10:15.

8:15-17 falls into three equal parts of 26 words. The first is the 'call to enjoyment' in v.15, introduced by the first person verb **ושבחתני אני**. It contains two clauses of six words (20 letters in the first, and 21 in the second) introduced by **אשר** and ending in **תחת השמש**, which might be compared thus:

**אשר אין-טוב לאדם תחת השמש**  
**אשר-נתן לו האלהים תחת השמש**

This indicates clearly that there is nothing good for people except that which is given to them by God. A contrast is drawn between people and God, and **לאדם** is picked up by **לו**, which may explain why only here does the expression **אין טוב לאדם** occur. Between these two clause are another two balanced clauses of five words and 21 letters each:

**כי אם-לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח**  
**והוא ילוננו בעמלו ימי חייו**

This means that the verse consists of an introduction followed by a chiasmus with the essential aspects of the thread of 'call to enjoyment verses' in the centre:

<b>ושבחתני אני את-שמחה</b>	intro.
<b>אשר אין-טוב לאדם תחת השמש</b>	chiasmus
<b>כי אם-לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח</b>	
<b>והוא ילוננו בעמלו ימי חייו</b>	
<b>אשר-נתן לו האלהים תחת השמש</b>	chiasmus

The second part is v.16 plus the first clause of v.17 which focuses on 'seeing', the verb **ראה** being used three times - in the infinitive, as a participle, and as a first person verb. The first of these verbs is in the middle of the first part of v.16 (6 words, 21 letters before; 6 words, 20 letters after); the second is at the end of the second part; and the third is at the beginning of v.17:

**כאשר נתתי את-לבי לדעת חכמה ולראות את-האענין אשר נעשה על-הארץ**  
**כי גם ביום ובלילה שנה בעיניו איננו ראה**  
**וראיתי את-כל-מעשה האלהים**

The third part is the rest of v.17 which consists of three statements about human inability to 'find' what is 'done under the sun', using the expression **לא [יוכל ל-] מצא** in each:

**כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת-השמש**  
**בשל אשר יעמל האדם לבקש ולא ימצא**  
**וגם אם-יאמר החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא**



### 5.6.3 9:1-6, death, the end of all that is done under the sun

את-כל-זה in 9:1 serves two purposes. Firstly, it links back to 8:9, the only other verse in Qohelet where it is found:

9:1	כי	את-כל-זה	נתתי אל-לבי
8:9	את-כל-זה ראיתי	ונתון אל-לבי	

Thus, while 8:9-17 seems to function as a unit contained within the inclusio formed by the phrase מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש, 9:1 ties in with these earlier verses by looking back to all that they discussed. It may be that הצדיקים, החכמים and ביד האלהים in v.1, and צדיק and רשע in v.2 also refer back to aspects of that discussion.

Secondly, it is emphasised by its repetition twice in one verse, which stresses that the author gave his heart to *all* that went before. In fact, there is a higher concentration of the word כל in 9:1-6,7-10 than anywhere else in the book (9:1,1,1,2,2,3,3,4,6,8,9,9,10).

The root עשה does not occur so often in 9:1-6,7-10, but it is still an important feature, and a further factor which links these verses with the preceding ones. It is used in identical phrases, בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש, at the end of each half of 9:1-6, then appears once in 9:7 and three times in 9:10.

גם-אהבה גם-שנאה in v.1 and in expanded form in v.6 is an inclusio to 9:1-6. The passage divides into halves of 57 and 56 words, with the phrase וגם לב בני-האדם מלא-רע in v.3 at the centre. The theme of the halves is the same: in the first half it is referred to as מקרה אחד (vv.2,3); in the second half explicit comparison is made between the living and the dead, the roots חיה (vv.3,4,4,5) and מות (vv.3,4,5,5) being used four times each.

The first half seems to be structured in this way:

- 11 word introduction - 'I examined all this'
- 15 word statement of the issue - 'righteous and wise in the hand of God, etc.'
- 5 word centre - 'everything is like everything else: all meet one fate'
- 15 word list illustrating that one fate comes to all
- 11 word conclusion - 'this is wrong ... that all meet one fate'

This suggests that the statement that the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God is answered by the list indicating that all meet the same fate. Perhaps the author intends to raise the question, 'What advantage does being "in the hand of God" bring?'

The structure of the second half is rather different. It consists of an introductory clause which sets the theme for the passage by comparing the living and the dead,

והוללות בלבבם בחייהם  
ואחריו אל- המתים

followed by two sections of 25 words each. The first section, vv.4-5a, presents three proverbs which assert the advantage of the living over the dead. The second, vv.5b-6, describes the lot of the dead.

The key concepts in 9:3b-6 are 'life' and 'death', making explicit what in vv.1-3a is referred to as מקרה אחד. Over a quarter of all the words from the root מות are in these verses, and the four words from the root חיה in vv.3-5 plus the three in v.9 make up more than a quarter of the words from this root. Surprisingly, only in these verses and 4:2 do the two roots occur together, and there seems to be at least a tension, if not a contradiction between the sentiments of 9:4,5 and 4:2, ושבח אני את-המתים שכבר מתו מן-החיים אשר המה חיים עדנה.

#### 5.6.4 9:7-10, make the most of what you find to do during your life

9:7-10 is the conclusion to the second half of 8:9-9:10, and like the conclusion to the first half, it includes a verse related to the 'call to enjoyment' verses. The reference to eating and drinking, as well as the use of the words שמחה and טוב, in 9:7 seems clearly to tie in with this thread, but it is 9:9 which most closely resembles the other 'call to enjoyment' verses.

The passage seems to fall into three parts with 9:9 at the centre, and a section 24 words long on either side. Each of the three parts starts with an admonition using the imperative:

לך אכל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב-טוב יינך  
ראה חיים עם-אשה אשר-אהבת כל-ימי חיי הבלך  
ובעמלך אשר-אתה עמל תחת השמש כל אשר תמצא ירך לעשות בכחך עשה

This is followed in both the first and last parts by a clause starting with כי which focuses on 'deeds', and these two clauses stand in sharp contrast to each other, one very positive asserting that God approves what you do, the other decidedly negative stating that there are no deeds in sheol. Moreover, there is a contrast between the imperative לך at the beginning of v.7, encouraging full enjoyment of life, and the participle הלך, expressing the inevitability of death. This gives a chiasmic pattern to this passage, the chiasmus revolving round v.9:

לך אכל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב-טוב יינך  
כי כבר רצה האלהים את-מעשיך  
בכל-עת יהיו בגדיך לבנים ושמן על-ראשך אל-יהסר



ראה חיים עם-אשה אשר-אהבת כל-ימי חיי הבלך  
אשר נתן לך תחת השמש כל ימי הבלך  
כי הוא חלקך בחיים

ובעמלך אשר-אתה עמל תחת השמש כל אשר תמצא ירך לעשות בכחך עשה  
כי אין מעשה וחשבון ודעת וחכמה בשאול  
אשר אתה חלך שמה

The contrast between the 'deeds' in the second line and the deeds in the penultimate line, plus the use of three words from the root עשה in the final section, indicate that this passage continues the discussion about 'the deeds that are done under the sun' which is the main theme of 8:9-9:10. In fact, it draws this discussion to a close - literally and figuratively.

As in vv.1-6, a contrast is drawn between life and death, but death is only mentioned once, and the root מות is not used at all. However, the reference to death is emphasised by being the last phrase in v.10: שאול אשר אתה הלך שמה. The root חיה is used three times in 9:7-10, all in v.9. Four times reference is made to one's life, and three different expressions are used:

חיים  
כל-ימי חיי הבלך  
כל ימי חבלך  
חיים

## 5.7 9:11-11:6

This whole section is concerned in one way or another with folly and wisdom and knowledge - or more particularly, lack of knowledge. 9:11-12 link this passage with the previous one by their concern with death. There is then a particular focus on wisdom from 9:13 to 10:2, these verses seeing the highest concentration of words from the root חכם anywhere in the book (9:13,15,15,16,16,17,18; 10:1,2 - an average of over one per verse)<sup>18</sup>. This overlaps with verses which focus particularly on folly. The roots כסל and סכל are used in higher concentration in 9:17-10:3, and 10:12-15 than elsewhere in the book (9:17; 10:1,2,3,3,12,13,14,15). ידע is not used again after the initial verses until the end of the verses relating specifically to folly, it then features regularly after explicit discussion of wisdom and folly ceases (10:14,15,20; 11:2,5,5,6). The end of the discussion about wisdom and

<sup>18</sup>There is also a very high concentration in 2:11-19, section B' of chapters one and two. There it occurs in vv.12,13,14,15,16,16,17,17.

folly is in the second person. Although neither wisdom nor folly is mentioned in 10:16-20, the proverbs in these verses constitute a suitable conclusion to the earlier verses which explicitly consider wisdom and folly. Similarly, vv.8-11 do not specifically refer to wisdom and folly - apart from once in a clause which does not fit the rest of the verse - but they are highly appropriate to the discussion nonetheless. In both instances, vv.8-11 and vv.16-20, the verses have the appearance of a collection of proverbs related to the theme of wisdom and folly, the earlier verses in the third person and the later verses, with one notable exception, in the second person. Vv.12-14a are similar, but both explicitly refer to the theme.

9:17-10:4 also specifically refer to wisdom and folly, but here, too, the verses are in the form of proverbs. These proverbs are separated from those in 10:8-14a by a short passage in the first person - the final time the first person occurs in Qohelet, and also the last time **תחת** **השמש** is used. The two collections of proverbs in 10:8-14a,16-20 are then separated by v.14b, which is one of the verses asserting that people do not know the future, and v.15 which ties v.14b into the theme of wisdom and folly. **לֹא-יָדָע** occurs in each of these verses.

This means that 9:17-10:20 consists of three collections of proverbs concerning wisdom and folly, of 56, 55 and 56 words, separated by one passage in the first person, 25 words in length, and one passage about 'not knowing' of 20 words. 9:11-16 functions as an introduction to the passage, and 11:1-6 as a conclusion (in the second person)<sup>19</sup>:

9:11-16	introduction - 'inappropriate consequences'	
9:17-10:4	collection of proverbs about wisdom and folly	56 words
10:5-7	passage about 'inappropriate consequences'	25 words <sup>20</sup>
10:8-14a	collection of proverbs about wisdom and folly	55 words
10:14b-15	passage about 'not knowing'	20 words <sup>20</sup>
10:16-20	collection of proverbs about wisdom and folly	56 words
11:1-6	conclusion - 'not knowing'	

<sup>19</sup>Murphy (1974) describes 7:1-8 and 9:17-11:6 as 'two collections of consecutive wisdom sayings.' He adds, 'It is impossible to determine if they are his own composition or merely represent a body of traditional wisdom which is preserved in his work.'

<sup>20</sup>These two sections of 25 and 20 words raise the question, how close does the word count need to be before it is a significant statistic? On many occasions we have noted 'balanced' sections which are one letter or one word different in length, but this is a much bigger difference. If nothing else, this is further evidence that Qohelet tantalises the reader with its repetitions and patterns, but refuses to conform precisely to rigid structures. We have attempted to structure passages primarily on thematic bases rather than trying to find neat patterns. Often more or less precise patterns have resulted.



5.7.1 9:11-16, unexpected or inappropriate consequences

9:11-16 consists of two equal parts of 52 words (vv.11-12,13-16), each introduced by a first person form of the verb ראה plus the phrase תחת השמש. This is reminiscent of the structure of sections in the first half of the book. שבתי וראה in v.11 suggests that a new theme is to be considered, while גם-זה ראייתי in v.13 introduces an example to illustrate the point made in vv.11-12. The theme in these verses is that the expected or appropriate consequences do not result, and this is illustrated in v.11 by an unprecedented five occurrences of לא asserting that the swift, strong, wise, discerning and knowledgeable do not receive the expected return from their abilities. Particular emphasis is placed on the last three of these because וגם is added at the start. The verse is structured with an introduction followed by כי, the five clauses starting with לא, and a conclusion starting with כי:

שבתי וראה תחת השמש  
כי  
ו- לא לקלים המרוץ  
ו- לא לגבורים המלחמה  
וגם לא לחכמים לחם  
וגם לא לנבנים עשר  
וגם לא לידעים חן  
כי-  
עת ופגע יקרה את-כלם

The conclusion is the precise centre of 9:11-12.

The start of v.12 picks up the end of v.11 using of the word עת. כי גם לא-ידע האדם in v.12 also picks up on the similar phrase in the previous verse, both using exactly the same number of letters (13),

v.11 ו- גם לא לידעים חן  
v.12 כי גם לא- ידע האדם

There are three consequences of this. The first is that extra emphasis is added to the words את-עתו at the end of the clause in v.12. The second is that the statement at the end of v.11 falls between two clauses about knowing, which anticipates an increasingly important theme in the final few chapters of Qohelet,

וגם לא לידעים חן  
כי-  
עת ופגע יקרה את-כלם  
כי  
גם לא-ידע האדם את-עתו

The third is that each of the five observations in v.11 is balanced by a statement in v.12, four of these starting with כִּי,

שבתי וראה תחת השמש כי	introduction
ו- לא לקלים המרוץ ו- לא לגבורים המלחמה וגם לא לחכמים לחם וגם לא לנבנים עשר וגם לא לידעים חן כי-	
עת ופגע יקרה את-כלם כי	centre
גם לא-ידע האדם את-עתו כדגים שנאחזים במצודה רעה כצפרים האחוזות בפח כהם יוקשים בני האדם לעת רעה כשתפול עליהם פתאם	

There does not seem to be any link between individual items in v.11 and individual items in v.12, rather there is a balance between the two halves of the passage which revolve around the statement at the centre.

Vv.13-16 divide into two parts: vv.13-15 introduce an example to illustrate an inappropriate outcome - a poor man's wisdom which is not listened to - and v.16 gives the author's response to this situation. The main point in the illustration is the contrast between wisdom and might. This is brought out by the use three times each of words from the roots חכם (vv.13,15,15) and גדל (vv.13,14,14). V.13 introduces the illustration, then v.14 sets the scene: a *great* king surrounds and builds *great* siegeworks against a *small* city with *few* people in it. V.15 relates how a *poor* wise man could have saved the city by his wisdom if only he had been listened to. The 'greatness' in v.14 is emphasised by the use twice of גדול: 'wisdom' is stressed in v.15 by two word from the root חכם, but so also is the wise man's poverty by the use twice of the word מסכן. The author's response in v.16 is in the form of a טוב מן- saying, טובה חכמה מגבורה. The last part of the verse then ties in with 9:17, the beginning of the next part of this section.

### 5.7.2 9:17-10:4, a comparison of wisdom and folly

Typical of ch.10, there seems in this section to be little development from one verse to the next, the passage rather being made up of a series of aphorisms on the theme of wisdom



and folly. Nonetheless, the first three verses of the section do serve as a bridge between 9:11-16 and ch.10. The most obvious link is the theme of ‘wisdom’ which runs from 9:13-10:2, the focus then shifting to ‘folly’ which appears first in 9:17 and continues more or less explicitly to the end of ch.10. However, there are three other connections: the words דברי and נשמעים in v.17 which pick up on ודבריו and נשמעים in v.16; the structure of vv.17,18 which closely parallels v.16; and the link in 9:18 and 10:1 to the theme of ‘inappropriate consequences’. These features illustrate the difficulty of attempting to clearly define separate passages in this book.

Words from the roots סכל/כסל give some kind of structure to the passage because they occur in a regular fashion:

סכל - 5 words - כסל - 4 words - סכל - 5 words - סכל

Words from the root חטא seem also to be part of this pattern, giving an overall structure to the passage like this:

	intro.
חוטא אחד	12 words
סכלות	5 words
כסיל	4 words
כשהסכל	5 words
סכל	12 words
חטאים גדולים	

It should be noted that all the occurrences of words from these roots are different, which helps to convey the sense of a comprehensive examination of folly.

The second person advice in 10:4 uses words which suggest that it may be a response to 9:17,18, and by this means these verses may also form an inclusio surrounding the passage. Words from the root נוה occur in both 9:17 and 10:4 in connection with proper or wise conduct; משול is used only in these two verses in Qohelet, and in both cases the implication is that the folly or anger of a ruler may be overcome by the proper or wise conduct which involves נוה; and the root חטא occurs in 9:18 and 10:4, where there is a contrast between חוטא אחד and חטאים גדולים.

5.7.3                    10:5-7, another example of inappropriate consequences

The use of the second person in v.4 is an appropriate way to end the previous passage, and the return to the first person in v.5 is also a typical indicator in Qohelet of a new section - especially in this case considering its similarity to 5:12; 6:1:

5:12	יש רעה חולה	ראיתי תחת השמש
6:1	יש רעה	אשר ראיתי תחת השמש
10:5	יש רעה	ראיתי תחת השמש

The use of השליט and שגגה in 10:5 instead of המושל and חטא also indicates that this is a new section. However, the theme is similar to that of 9:11-16, the lack of appropriate consequences, and may offer a further example to support that theme. In this case, the use of ראיתי is appropriate following its use in 9:11 and 9:13. In 9:13-16 what was observed to be inappropriate was wisdom which was *not* given the attention it deserved; here it is folly that is given a higher place than it deserves that is inappropriate. This ties in with the preceding (9:17-10:4) and following (10:8-14a) passages, and serves to link them back to 9:11.

10:5-7 consists of three sentences, the first and third of which are the same length and both use the word ראיתי. This may set the middle sentence apart as the main focus of the passage, and, indeed, the passage could be read in such a way that v.5 introduces the ‘evil’ the author has seen, v.6 then goes on to describe what that evil is, while v.7 provides a concrete example:

יש רעה ראיתי תחת השמש כשגגה שיצא מלפני השליט	introduction
נתן הסכל במרומים רבים ועשירים בשפל ישבו	problem
ראיתי עבדים על-סוסים ושרים הלכים כעבדים על-הארץ	example

The middle line here is also the centre of 9:17-10:14a so that all the proverbs in 9:17-10:4 and 10:8-14a revolve around this observation of a fool set in a position of power.

5.7.4                    10:8-14a, proverbs concerning folly

This passage consists of three pairs of proverbs, and two awkward clauses of three words each, which draw a sharp contrast between the wise and the fool,



חפר סומץ בו יפול ופרץ גדר ישכנו נחש  
מסיע אבנים יעצב בהם בוקע עצים יסכן במ

אם-פהה הברזל והוא לא-פנים פלפל וחילים יגבר  
אם-ישך הנחש בלוא-לחש ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון

דברי פי-חכם חן ושפתות כסיל תבלענו  
תחלת דברי-פיהו סכלות ואחרית פיהו הוללות רעה  
והסכל ירבה דברים

Vv.8,9 are constructed in two equal halves of four words each:

v.8 חפר גומץ בו יפול  
ופרץ גדר ישכנו נחש

v.9 מסיע אבנים יעצב בהם  
בוקע עצים יסכן במ

The verbs with which the first half of the verses open are both to do with digging, while the second half of both verses commences with a verb concerned with breaking. All four of these verbs are participles, while in all four sections there is also an imperfect verb.

The strict parallelism of the two halves of the verse is more closely followed in v.9 where the order in both is:

participle plural noun imperfect כ + third person suffix

Moreover, the parallelism is enhanced by the use of two participles which both end in  $\text{לְ-}$ , to go along with the  $\text{יִ-}$  ending on both nouns and the *mem* of the third person suffix. Also the two imperfect verbs have reasonably close meanings. We should note, though, that at the end of the first half the word  $\text{בהם}$  is used, while the shorter form,  $\text{בם}$  appears at the end of the second half - had they been the other way round the two halves would have been the same length to the letter.

V.8 is constructed slightly differently. The first half contains the same elements as the two halves of v.9, but in the singular and in different order:

participle singular noun כ + third person suffix imperfect

The second half is in the same order as v.9, but uses a second noun in place of the preposition + pronominal suffix:

participle singular noun imperfect singular noun

And where both sections in v.9 start with a participle ending in  $\text{לְ-}$  followed by a noun ending in  $\text{יִ-}$ , the  $\text{לְ-}$  and  $\text{יִ-}$  endings occur the opposite way around in the second part of v.8. More-

over, the predominant 'o' sound of the first half is repeated only in the first word of the second half of the verse.

יפול	בו	גומץ	חפר	v.8
		גדר	ופרץ	
נחש	ישכנו			
בהם	יעצב	אבנים	מסיע	v.9
בם	יסכן	עצים	בוקע	

Like the preceding verses, vv.10,11 are also very similar - apart from the final clause, **ויתרון הכשיר חכמה**, of v.10, which seems to intrude. If this clause is ignored for the moment, we have two verses of identical length, even to the number of letters:

אם-קהה הברזל והוא לא-פנים קלקל וחילים יגבר	v.10
אם-ישך הנחש בלוא-לחש ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון	v.11

However, the balance is not maintained to the same extent as in the two halves of v.9, because the protasis and the apodosis are of different lengths in the two verses:

אם-קהה הברזל והוא לא-פנים קלקל וחילים יגבר	v.10
אם-ישך הנחש בלוא-לחש ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון	v.11

Nonetheless, both verses start **אם** + verb + noun, and in both verses this is followed by a negative describing what has not been done. Because the end of v.10 disrupts the pattern, particular attention is drawn to these three words.

There is something of a chiasmus in vv.8-11: the snake biting is mentioned in vv.8,11, and there may be reference to chopping wood in vv.9,10. All these proverbs may point to the dangers of carrying out such activities foolishly, but they also reflect the theme of 'inappropriate consequences'.

That vv.12-14a are concerned with 'speech' is made clear by the words **דברי פי-חכם** at the beginning, **דברי פיהו** precisely at the centre, and **דברים** at the end. That it is the speech of fools which is at issue is emphasised by three different words from the roots **כלס/סכל**, with four words between,

כסיל 4 words סכלות 4 words והסכל

The mouth is used to great effect to symbolise speech, recalling the admonition in 8:2, **פי-מלך שמור**. The phrase at the start of v.12 is used three times, getting progressively shorter



each time: שפתות פיהו → דברי-פיהו → דברי פי-חכם. In the second half of v.12 the words and תבלענו are also words connected with the mouth, and as Crenshaw (1988:174) points out,

Qohelet's image is exquisite: the lips from which foolish utterances flow become the instrument of destruction, ultimately swallowing their owner.

The balance of v.13 is maintained by דברי being omitted from the second half so that each half has four words. However, the same omission in v.12 results in the second half being one word shorter than the first:

v.12 דברי פי חכם חן  
ושפתות כסיל תבלענו

v.13 תחלת דברי-פיהו סכלות  
ואחרית פיהו הוללות רעה

In v.12 the parallelism is used to contrast the words of a wise person with those of a fool - the last two words in the first half being opposed to the last two in the second half. Reference to the mouth remains constant. By contrast, in v.13 the parallelism is used to express the completeness of the folly of the fool's words. Again, reference to the mouth remains constant, and 'folly' and 'wicked madness' are parallel. The contrast comes between תחלת and אחרית, which serve to convey the comprehensiveness of the statement.

The balance between v.8 and v.9, v.10 and v.11, and v.12 and v.13 highlights the two clauses of three words which do not fit this pattern. This serves to further heighten the contrast between the success of the wise person, and the many words of the fool:

v.10 ויתרון הכשיר חכמה  
v.14 והסכל ירבה דברים

#### 5.7.5 10:14b-15, concerning what is not known

Apart from the first three words, v.14 is in the form of a chiasmus where two references to the future are set side by side at the centre, with two different phrases conveying lack of knowledge about the future at the beginning and end:

לא-ידע האדם      מה-שיהיה      ואשר יהיה מאחריו      מי יגיד לו

The two halves, and indeed the four quarters, of the chiasmus would have been perfectly balanced had the full form of אשר been used in the first half. V.15 picks up לא-ידע from the

previous verse, and links this with 'fools', but it does not display the same careful balance as the verses preceding it. It serves to link the thread of verses concerned with human inability to discern the future with the theme of 'folly'.

#### 5.7.6 10:16-20, exhortations not to act foolishly

Like 10:8-14a, this passage contains three paired sayings, plus a three word clause that seems to intrude. It also includes a saying in three parts which uses words that are characteristic of Qohelet:

אי-לך ארץ שמלכך נער ושריך בבקר יאכלו v.16  
אשריך ארץ שמלכך בן-חורים ושריך בעת יאכלו v.17

בגבורה ולא בשתי

בעצלתים ימך המקרה v.18  
ובשפלות ידיים ידלף הבית

לשחוק עשים לחם v.19  
ויין ישמח חיים  
והכסף יענה את-הכל

גם במדעך מלך אל-תפלל ובחדרי משכבך אל-תפלל עשיר v.20  
כי עוף השמים יוליך את-הקול ובעל הכנפים יגיד דבר

Vv.16,17 seem clearly to be designed to complement one another. In fact, אי-לך, at the beginning of v.16, and אשריך, with which v.17 starts, suggest that the two are designed as antithetical statements. The similarity of the two verses serves only to heighten the contrast between them: the words ארץ, שמלכך, ושריך and יאכלו occur in identical form in the two verses, אי-לך starts and finishes with the same letters as אשריך, and בבקר and בעת both use the preposition ב-. However, as with v.10 in comparison with v.11, in considering the parallels between v.16 and v.17 the last three words of v.17 appear out of place:

אם-פהה הברזל והוא לא-פנים פלפל וחילים יגבר ויתרון הכשיר חכמה v.10  
אם-ישך הנחש בלוא-להש ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון v.11

אי-לך ארץ שמלכך נער ושריך בבקר יאכלו v.16  
אשריך ארץ שמלכך בן-חורים ושריך בעת יאכלו בגבורה ולא בשתי v.17

10:18 is of typical concise proverbial form, and is very similar to v.9. The structure of the two halves of v.9 is identical, and could be represented thus:

subject (two words) imperfect verb ב- + indirect object



The structure of the two halves of v.18 is also identical, although the indirect object (שפלות) in the second half consists of two words, where only one is used in the first half (עצלותים). This structure might be presented thus:

-ב + indirect object    imperfect verb    subject

We can thus see that the verse adopts much the same structure as in v.9, but in reverse order, and without the carefully balanced number of words in each half.

V.19 stands out sharply from the verses either side of it, partly because of its structure, but also because it uses words familiar from the rest of the book, and picks up the sentiments of the 'call to enjoyment' verses. In fact, the verse bears a number of similarities to 9:7-9 in particular, where the words לחם and יין occur together, and the roots שמח and עשה are also used, לך אכל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב-טוב יינך כי כבר רצה האלהים את-מעשיך. It contains two balanced halves (3 words, 12 letters in each) that display a chiasmus in which לחם and יין are brought together in the middle, with the two verbs either side, and שחוק and חיים at beginning and end:


  
לשחוק עשים לחם ויין ישמח חיים

But these are followed by a third line which is longer both in terms of words and letters:

לשחוק עשים לחם  
 ויין ישמח חיים  
 והכסף יענה את-הכל

Because the other verses round about contain two balanced lines, particular attention is drawn to the third line in this verse.

V.20 consists of two halves each of which displays similar parallelism to the earlier verses:

גם במדעך מלך אל-תקלל  
 ובחדרי משכבך אל-תקלל עשיר  
 כי עוף השמים יוליך את-הקול  
 ובעל הכנפים יגיד דבר

References to a king and the high concentration of second person terms in vv.16,17 and v.20, plus the similarity in length (19 words, 74 letters; and 20 words, 75 letters), may indicate that these verses form an inclusio to this short passage.

### 5.7.7 11:1-6, what you do not know

The particular theme of 11:1-6, which picks up on 9:11,12 and 10:14b-15, is the assertion that 'you do not know'. This is conveyed by the alternating pattern:

לא	תדע	v.2
אינך	יודע	v.5a
לא	תדע	v.5b
אינך	יודע	v.6

The proverbs from ch.10 continue into 11:1-6, and like most of 10:16-20 these also are mostly in the second person. Also like 10:16-20, there is a total absence of perfect verbs in 11:1-6<sup>21</sup>. Vv.1,2 form a pair of proverbs which are similarly constructed, and v.6, although considerably more complex, follows the same basic pattern,

שלח לחמך על-פני המים כי ברב הימים תמצאנו	v.1
תן-חלק לשבעה וגם לשמונה כי לא תדע מה-יהיה רעה על-הארץ	v.2
בבקר זרע את-זרעך ולערב אל-תנח ירך כי אינך יודע אי זה יכשר הזה או-זה ואם-שניהם כאחד טובים	v.6

There is a rather different pair of sayings in v.3,

אם-ימלאו העבים גשם ואם יפול עץ בדרום ואם בצפון מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא	על-הארץ יריקו
--	---------------

There is a different pair again in v.4,

שמר רוח לא יזרע וראה בעבים לא יקצור
--

And different again in v.5,

כאשר אינך יודע מה-דרך הרוח כעצמים בבטן המלאה ככה לא-תדע את-מעשה האלהים אשר יעשה את-הכל
---

Vv.1,2 both start with what might be termed 'distributive' verbs in the imperative: שלח in v.1, and תן in v.2 (see also זרע in v.6). Directly following these in both verses is the object: לחם and חלק which again could be interpreted in a similar vein. This is followed by an adverbial phrase which describes the destination of the object in each case: על-פני המים and

<sup>21</sup>This is also a feature of the time-poem in 3:1-8, the טוב מן- passage in 7:1-8, and the passage about the interpretation of words in 8:1-7. There are only two perfect verbs in the section of proverbs from 10:8-13, and only one in 9:17-10:4. The second person section in 4:17-5:6 also contains only two perfect verbs.



כי-ברב הימים תמצאנו: כי in v.1; and כי לא תדע מה-יהיה רעה על-הארץ in v.2. We might represent the parallelism thus:

imperative	object	adverbial phrase	... for/yet	
שלח	לחמך	על-פני המים	כי-	ברב הימים תמצאנו
תן-	חלק	לשבעה וגם לשמונה	כי	לא תדע מה-יהיה רעה על-הארץ

This shows clearly that the first halves of the two verses run in parallel, even to the extent of containing the same number of words. However, the similarity of the first halves of the verses serves to heighten the differences in the second halves.

V.3 consists of two conditional statements concerning the ways in which natural laws operate. Both protasis and apodosis are two words longer in the second half of the verse:

apodosis	protasis
על-הארץ יריקו	אם-ימלאו העבים גשם
מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא	ואם-יפול עץ בדרום ואם בצפון

It may be that the verse recalls 1:6,7, especially if the wind is understood to be the cause of the tree falling in 11:3:

הולך אל-דרוך וסובב אל-צפון סובב סבב הולך הרוח ועל-סביבתיו שב הרוח  
כל-הנחלים הלכים אל-הים והים איננו מלא אל-מקום שהנחלים הלכים שם הם שבים ללכת

The first part of 11:3 supplies the elements which are missing from the cycle in 1:7: there we have the rivers and the sea, here we find the clouds and the rain. In 1:7 constant repetition is used to emphasise the natural cycle (הנחלים twice; words from the root הלך three times; אל- twice; הים twice; the ending ם- ten times), but in the first part of 11:3 there is no repetition. Participles are used in 1:7 to indicate constantly repeating actions, but in 11:3 imperfect verbs are used with the conditional, אם. In 1:7 the notion of a cycle is portrayed by the observation that הים איננו מלא, but in 11:3 the clouds are described as full, then emptying themselves. Moreover, all the movement in 11:3 is in one direction - down to earth.

The phrase from 1:7 אל-מקום שהנחלים הלכים שם הם שבים ללכת is picked up in the second part of 11:3, מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא, but again the indications of repetition are absent: אל-, which indicates 'movement towards' a place, is removed from before מקום; the imperfect is used instead of a participle; שם הם שבים is replaced by the statement יהוא שם (whatever precisely this means); and instead of the verb הלך, which could suggest movement in any direction, the verb נפל is used, indicating direction in one direction only - and then with a definite terminus. However, this second part of 11:3 is more closely linked with 1:6. Here

too the verb **שוב** occurs in participial form, along with five other participles: **הולך** twice and **סובב** three times. The root **סבב** is, of course, highly appropriate in the context of cycles and repetition, and it is used four times in total, including the noun **סביבתיו**. Also in 1:6 the preposition **-אל** is used with **דרום** and **צפון**, suggesting *movement* in these directions, but in 11:3 (the only other verse in Qohelet where these words occur) it is the preposition **-ב** which is used, eliminating any sense of continual movement.

There is repetition in the second half of 11:3, but it is of a very different order to that in 1:6,7. 1:6,7 are saturated with repeated words which are put together in a way which gives an impression of never-ending repetitions and cycles. In 11:3, however, the repetition is very carefully constructed to serve a very different function:

ואם - יפול עץ בדרום ואם בצפון  
מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא

**יפול עץ** is picked up from the first part of the saying, and **מקום** picks up on **בדרום** and **בצפון**. **שיפול העץ** thus serves as a concise summary of the first part and leads straight into the very abrupt conclusion: 'there it is!', or 'there it will be!'. In this way any sense of the cyclical phenomena described in ch.1 is destroyed. We observed in 1:6 that the use of so many participles and the words **דרום** and **צפון** served to produce a constantly repeated 'o'-sound in the verse which might represent the howling of the wind: the repetition in 11:3 helps to produce this same effect without the use of participles:

ואם-יפול עץ בדרום ואם בצפון מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא

These vowels also serve to produce a subtle chiasmic structure to the saying whereby there is a build up in the first half through **ול...ום...ון**, which then comes down in the second half through **ול...ום**. The build up is slower, with one word between each of the 'o'-sound words: in the second half the 'o'-sound words occur consecutively:

ואם-יפול עץ בדרום ואם בצפון מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא

This is an effective way of quickening the pace of the concluding part of the verse, and serves to draw particular attention to the final words of the verse which do not fit in the pattern - and stand in sharp contrast to the movement in 1:6,7.

Further links can be discerned between the 1:4-11 and 11:1-6. The most obvious link is the discussion in both of natural elements, but, as we observed above, the emphasis in ch.1



is on repetition and cycles, while this emphasis is lost in ch.11 which portrays linear progressions in nature. This is continued in 11:7-12:7 in the linear development from childhood to old age to death. In fact, from 11:5-12:7 the development is from a foetus in the womb to childhood to old age to death. Thus while there seem to be obvious links between the two passages, the perspective is very different.

We might represent the word links between the two chapters thus<sup>22</sup>:

ארץ	1:4	11:2,3
מקום	1:5,7	11:3
שם	1:5,7	11:3
דרום	1:6	11:3
צפון	1:6	11:3
רוח	1:6(x2)	11:4,5
מלא	1:7,8	11:3,5
אין	1:7,9,11	11:5,6
לא	1:8(x3)	11:2,4,5
ראה	1:8,10	11:4,
מה-(ש/י)היה	1:9	11:2
עשה	1:9(x2)	11:5(x2)

Although דור in 1:4 is not mentioned in ch.11 (or anywhere else in Qohelet), זרע is also connected to this theme, as is the reference to a foetus in the womb. The root זרה in 1:5 is not used in ch.11 (or anywhere else in the book), but the root זרע which is used three times in ch.11, and nowhere else in Qohelet, sounds very similar. נחלים and חים from 1:7 are not

<sup>22</sup>Cf Clemens (1994:5), who sees in 1:1-11 and 11:7-12:14 'two corresponding structures that frame the book, identifying its author, its central conclusion, and the evidence upon which that conclusion is based.' He represents the structure thus:

A Author 1:1		12:9-14 Author A'
(1:1)	words	(12:10,11)
(1:1)	Preacher	(12:9,10)
B Conclusion 1:2		12:8 Conclusion B'
(1:2)	vanity	(12:8)
(1:2)	says	(12:8)
(1:2)	Preacher	(12:8)
C Death 1:3-11		11:7-12:7 Death C'
(1:3,5,9)	sun	(11:7,12:2)
(1:4,6,7)	go, etc.	(11:9,12:5)
(1:4,5)	come, set, etc.	(11:8,9,12:1)
(1:4)	earth	(12:7)
(1:4)	[for]ever, eternal	(12:5)
(1:5,6,7)	to, toward, into	(12:5,6,7)
(1:6)	turning, go about	(12:5)
(1:6,7)	returns, again	(12:2,7)
(1:6)	wind, spirit	(12:7)
(1:11)	remembrance, remember	(11:8,12:1)

mentioned in ch.11 (nor anywhere else in Qohelet), but sources of 'water' are amply represented by the words המים (v.1); העבים (vv.3,4) and גשם (v.3).

However, these words are treated very differently in the two passages. In 1:7 the sea is described as לא-תמלא, while the clouds in 11:3 are full; the ear is described as לא-תמלא in 1:8, while 11:5 refers to המלאה; 1:9 states, מה-שנעשה הוא שיעשה ואין כל-חדש תחת השמש, suggesting that all things that are done are simply those which have already been done, again emphasising repetition, but 11:5 asserts לא-תדע את-מעשה האלהים אשר יעשה את-הכל, indicating that we cannot predict the deeds of God.

11:4 is constructed of two carefully balanced halves, thus:

<u>farming imperfect</u>	<u>negative adverb</u>	<u>natural phenomenon</u>	<u>seeing participle</u>
יזרע	לא	רוח	שמר
יקצור	לא	בעבים	וראה

שמר can have the sense either of 'watching' or 'keeping/preserving': the former seems more applicable here as it is a near-synonym for ראה. רוח serves as a link both with the preceding verse, where the wind may well be responsible for the tree falling, and the following verse where רוח occurs again. בעבים ties in with the use of the same word in the previous verse. There is something of a chiasmus formed by the use of עבים in 3a and 4b, and the allusion to the wind in 3b and the mention of רוח in 4a. יזרע here points forward to זרע and זרעך in v.6, the only other verse in Qohelet where words from this root are found. The root קצר, 'reap, harvest', occurs only here in Qohelet. By means of the two verbs יזרע and יקצור both ends of the cultivation process are covered.

V.5 consists of two halves which compare something that is not known in the human realm, with lack of knowledge about what God does:

כאשר אינך יודע מה-דרך הרוח כעצמים בבטן המלאה  
ככה לא תדע את-מעשה האלהים אשר יעשה את-הכל

The middle section of v.6 also ties in with these two lines:

כאשר אינך יודע מה-דרך הרוח כעצמים בבטן המלאה	v.5a
ככה לא תדע את-מעשה האלהים אשר יעשה את-הכל	v.5b
כי אינך יודע אי זה יכשר הזה או-זה	v.6b

The second half of 11:1-6 is thus clearly marked out as asserting human inability to know certain things. Although vv.1-3 are not unrelated to this theme, the focus there is rather dif-



ferent. V.4 certainly ties in with the consideration of natural elements in vv.1-3, but it also points forward to the first part of v.6:

שמר רוח לא יזרע וראה בעבים לא יקצור v.4  
בבקר זרע את-זרעך ולערב אל-תנח ידך v.6

The two clauses are the same length, both use the word זרע, found only in these two verses in Qohelet, and both use two negatives; but v.4 is in the third person and v.6 in the second person. It may be that v.4 links the 40 words of 11:1-3 with the 40 words of vv.5-6, the ambiguity of רוח functioning particularly well in this position.

The two parts of the first half of v.6 are carefully balanced:

<u>noun + 2nd person suffix</u>	<u>verb encouraging action</u>	<u>temporal phrase</u>
את-זרעך	זרע	בבקר
ידך	אל-תנח	ולערב

The balance in the number of words is maintained by the use of the object marker on זרעך to balance the negative adverb on תנח. זרע and אל-תנח express the same idea antithetically: זרע is a positive exhortation to action, אל-תנח is a negative exhortation not to refrain from action. This balance draws attention to the final clause of the verse which asserts that one does not know what is 'good' or 'better'.

The second line of v.6 consists of three parts of three words each which greatly stress the word זה, building up from 'nothing' to one occurrence to two:

כי אינך יודע  
אי זה נכשר  
הזה או-זה

This is reversed in the final part of the verse where the word שניהם is followed by כאחד. When combined with the interrogatives אי and ה-, and the particle אם-, the doubt over which is effective is clearly conveyed. The last clause, ואם-שניהם כאחד טובים, may be deeply ironical. It may serve to cast doubt on the series of better than sayings which have appeared in the book, especially in ch.7. The passage in 4:8-12 which compares השנים and האחד, on three occasions using clauses starting with אם-, is also pertinent. A comparison of the central clause in that passage with this final clause of 11:1-6 illustrates the point well:

טובים השנים מן-האחד 4:9  
אם-שניהם כאחד טובים 11:6

The structure of v.6 might be represented thus:

בבקר זרע את-זרעך ולערב אל-תנח ידך	balanced exhortation
כי אינך יודע אי זה יכשר הזה או-זה	question about 'which is better?'
אם-שניהם כאחד טובים	ironic conclusion

5.8 11:7-12:8, youth, old age and death

11:7-12:8 falls into three parts: 11:7-8 is an introduction; 11:9-10 is about youth; and 12:1-7 is about old age and dying. 12:8 is a conclusion not only to this passage, but to the whole of the book, the remaining verses constituting the epilogue. Indeed, הבל concludes each part of the section which is of particular note when it is considered that the word does not feature at all in 9:11-11:6,

כל-שבא הבל	11:8
כי-הילדות והשחרות הבל	11:10
הבל הבלים אמר הקוהלת הכל הבל	12:8

The introduction is written in the third person, but the other two parts are both in the second person, picking up the third person verbs ישמח and יזכר from the introduction and recasting them as imperatives at the beginning of the two sections - the final occurrence of both verbs. This means that the final 22 verses of the book, apart from the epilogue in 12:9-14, are cast mostly in the second person as direct address to the reader. The end of the epilogue also takes the form of admonition.

There is a chiasmus which runs across the sections we have just described, starting in the introduction and finishing at the beginning of the third part. It is formed by the use of the words 'days' and 'years':

שנים	11:8a
ימי החשך	11:8b
בימי בחורותך	11:9
בימי בחורתך	12:1a
ימי הרעה	12:1b
שנים	12:1c

This places the section about the 'days of youth' at the centre, and draws some kind of a parallel between ימי החשך and ימי הרעה, perhaps preparing the reader for the theme of approaching



death in 12:1-5. There is also a connection established between 11:8a and 12:1c, but these two lines of identical length (8 words, 28 letters) form a sharp contrast between the many days of life which bring joy, and the 'evil days' in which there is no pleasure:

כי אם-שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח	11:8
והגיעו שנים אשר תאמר אין-לי בהם חפץ	12:1

These two features help to establish the unity of 11:7-12:8.

11:8 seems to consist of three parts - two balanced phrases plus a short concluding statement attached at the end of the verse:

כי אם-שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח  
ויזכר את-ימי החשך כי-הרבה יהיו  
כל-שבא הבל

If we rearrange the order of the words in the second part of the verse, the similarity between the first two parts becomes quite clear:

<u>imperfect/jussive verb</u>		<u>imperfect verb</u>	<u>הרבה</u>	<u>temporal reference</u>	<u>כי</u>
ישמח	האדם בכלם	יחיה	הרבה	שנים	כי אם-
ויזכר		יהיו	הרבה	ימי החשך	כי את-

Both sections contain the word **כי**, which in each case is probably causal rather than asseverative. There is also a temporal reference modified by the adverb **הרבה** in both sections. **הרבה** is then followed by the verbs **היה**, in the first section, and **חיה** in the second, which are similar both in appearance and in meaning. The change from **חיה** to **היה** is subtle but important, because it illustrates the fact that while the days of darkness will be many, they will not be accompanied by life: thus the person who lives a long time should also bear in mind that he or she will be dead a long time. This ties in with the implications of 7:4 that a wise person lives his or her life bearing the fact of death in mind, **לב חכמים בבית אבל ולב כסילים בבית שמחה**, **האדם** is not repeated in the second section, but is nonetheless clearly the subject of the verb with which it starts. **בכלם** is not repeated in the second section either, but it is picked up by the concluding statement. The verbs **ישמח** and **יזכר** are in precisely the same form, which may be the imperfect but is probably to be read as the jussive.

However, despite these similarities, the two parts of the verse are structured differently for good reasons. Firstly, by placing **ישמח** at the end of the first part and **יזכר** at the beginning of the next, these two verbs are brought together, emphasising the point that one should 'enjoy

but remember'<sup>23</sup>. These two themes are then developed in 11:9-10 and 12:1-7 respectively: the imperative שמח is found at the start of 11:9, and the imperative זכר at the start of 12:1.

Both 11:9 and 10 follow the pattern established in 11:7-8 whereby the verses start with a seemingly very positive statement or exhortation,

ומתוק האור וטוב לעינים לראות את-השמש כי אם-שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח	7-8a
שמח בחור בילדותיך ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותך והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך	9a
והסר כעס מלבך והעבר רעה מבשרך	10a

Each of these is then modified by the second half of the verse:

ויזכר את-ימי החשך כי-הרבה יהיו כל-שבא הבל	v.8b
ודע כי על-כל-אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט	v.9b
כי-הילדות והשחרות הבל	v.10b

V.10 has much the same structure as v.9, only it is exactly half the length, and 12:1a, the final reference to youth before the three passages starting עד אשר לא- which focus on old age and death, is half the length of v.10:

שמח בחור בילדותיך ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותך והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך	11:9a
והסר כעס מלבך והעבר רעה מבשרך	11:10a
וזכר את-בוראיך	12:1a
ודע כי על-כל-אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט	11:9b
כי-הילדות והשחרות הבל	11:10b
בימי בחורתך	12:1b

This is an effective way to wind down the discussion of youth before commencing the passage on old age and death. The same effect is achieved by the reduction from three words for 'youth' in v.9 (בחור, ילדות, and בחורות), to two in v.10 (ילדות and שחרות), to one in 12:1 (חורת); and three imperatives (שמח, וחלך, ודע), to two (והעבר and והסר), to one (זכר). The unprecedented seven second person pronominal suffixes in v.9 also reduces to two in v.10 and 12:1. 12:1a serves to link 11:9-10 and 12:1-7, so that they form parts of a unified whole.

12:1b-7 falls into three sections introduced by the expression עד אשר לא-. This phrase follows on from the imperative זכר with which v.1 begins. Thus the passage takes the form:

Remember your creator in the days of your youth,  
until...  
until...  
until...

<sup>23</sup>Ogden (1984:38) argues that, 'the call to enjoyment and concurrent reflection on the inevitable future of humanity in death, is indeed the central theme of the book.'



The first section refers to 'days of misery' in contrast to the 'days of your youth'. These are also years which give no pleasure, and seems to describe old age. The final section, exactly twice the length (28 words) of the first, refers to death. The middle section seems to fill in the gap between these two, describing increasing decrepitude as death approaches.

The middle section might be further divided thus:

introduction - "the storm or calamity"  
v.2 עד אשר לא-תחשך השמש והאור והירח והכוכבים  
ושבו העבים אחר הגשם v.3 ביום

section 1 - "house imagery"  
שיועו שמרי הבית  
והתעותו אנשי החיל  
ובטלו הטחנות כי מעטו  
וחשכו הראות בארבות  
וסגרו דלתים בשוק v.4  
בשפל קול הטחנה

section 2 - "imagery from nature"  
ויקום לקול הצפור  
וישחו כל-בנות השיר  
יראו וחתחתים בדרך v.5 גם מגבה  
וינאץ השקד  
ויסתבל החגב  
ותפר האביונה

conclusion - "explanation"  
כי-הלך האדם אל-בית עולמו  
וסבבו בשוק הספרדים

V.2 serves to introduce the section using language which is pregnant with the symbolism of an approaching disaster of considerable consequence. The symbolism may be metaphorical and certainly has eschatological overtones, but it also functions on a literal level to describe an approaching storm<sup>24</sup>.

There are three good reasons for taking v.3 and the first half of v.4 together. Firstly, the verbs in this section are consistent with its being a unit, and they follow the same pattern as the verbs in v.2 - an imperfect verb followed by perfect verbs prefixed with the *waw*. If these verbs are read as sequential, the sense throughout is that of the imperfect. This suggests incomplete action, and is appropriate for events in the future to which the phrase *עד אשר לא-* points.

<sup>24</sup>On the different levels at which the text can be read, see Fox (1988; 1989:281-311).

Secondly, whatever the ‘household’ imagery represents, it is restricted to this section, and, this is the part of the passage which can most readily be interpreted in terms of imagery representing the decrepitude of an aging body.

Thirdly, the first five elements in vv.3-4 follow a pattern thus:

<u>second noun/verb</u>	<u>pre-fixed element</u>	<u>plural noun</u>	<u>‘imperfect’ verb</u>
בֵּית	ה־	שְׁמֵרִי	יִזְעוּ
חֵיל	ה־	אֲנָשִׁי	וְהִתְעוּתוּ
מַעֲטוֹ	כִּי	הַטַּחֲנוֹת	וּבִטְלוּ
אֲרָבוֹת	ב־	אֲרָאוֹת	וְחָשְׁכוּ
שׁוֹק	ב־	דְּלָתַיִם	וּסְגְרוּ

The final line of the section does not fit this pattern, but it conforms to the pattern of three words per line, and the chiasmus in terms of numbers of letters per line:

יִזְעוּ שְׁמֵרִי הַבֵּית	12 letters
וְהִתְעוּתוּ אֲנָשִׁי הַחֵיל	15 letters
וּבִטְלוּ הַטַּחֲנוֹת כִּי מַעֲטוֹ	17 letters
וְחָשְׁכוּ הָאֲרָאוֹת בְּאֲרָבוֹת	16 letters
וּסְגְרוּ דְלָתַיִם בְּשׁוֹק	14 letters
בְּשַׁפְלֵי קוֹל הַטַּחֲנוֹת	12 letters

It acts as a link between sections 1 and 2.

The verbs in the second half of v.4 and the first two parts of v.5 are different, and, with the possible exception of the anomalous יִרְאוּ in 5a, are consistent with 4b-5ab being a unit - they are all imperfect verbs prefixed by the waw. This may indicate that, rather than a single consistent description being built up as in the previous section, this is a series of related, but not necessarily sequential clauses. The ‘household’ imagery disappears after the first half of v.4, and most of the clauses in this section do not so readily lend themselves to interpretation as figures of an aging body.

The section builds up by one word in each of the first three lines, and by one letter in each of the last three:

וַיִּקְוֶם לְקוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר
וַיִּשְׁחֹךְ כָּל-בְּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר
גַּם מִגְבַּה יִרְאוּ וְחִתְחִתִּים בְּדֶרֶךְ
וַיִּנְאַץ הַשֶּׁקֶד
וַיִּסְתַּבֵּל הַחֲגַב
וַתִּפְרֹץ הָאֲבִיוֹנָה

Similarly, vv.6,7, after the introductory phrase עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-, display a structure of three paired clauses which increase in length throughout the section:



עד אשר לא-

ירחק חבל הכסף  
ותרץ גלה הזהב

ותשבר כד על-המבוא  
ונרץ הגלגל אל-הבור

וישב העפר על-הארץ כש-היה  
והרוח תשוב אל-האלהים אשר נתנה:

The first two pairs (= v.6) seem to be symbols of death. Both depict the irreversible destruction of something valuable, presumably symbolising the destruction of life when death comes. The final pair (= v.7) seems more explicitly to refer to death. The balance between the two halves of the verse is disrupted by the reversal of the verb and noun in the second half:

וישב העפר על-הארץ כש-היה  
והרוח תשוב אל-האלהים אשר נתנה:

This may serve to emphasise the word וְהָרוּחַ, particularly in view of the fact that the verb usually comes first in biblical Hebrew, and does so in each of the other lines. The reversal of word order might also be a means of signalling the end of the section.

12:8 acts as an inclusio with 1:2, enclosing the main part of the book: 1:1 is as a superscription, and 12:9-14 is an epilogue, or perhaps appendix, to the book. There are, however, two difference between 12:8 and 1:2 which should be noted. The first is that הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים is repeated in 1:2, but not in 12:8,

הכל הבל	הבל הבלים	הבל הבלים אמר קהלת	1:2
הכל הבל		הבל הבלים אמר הקוהלת	12:8

We might have expected an exact repetition of the opening verse, but the concluding verse seems to be in slightly condensed form. If 12:8 functions as the final verse in the passage starting at 12:1, it is possible that הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים refers *specifically* to the theme of that passage, which seems to be 'approaching death', while the expression in 1:2 might be a more general statement introducing a (the?) key theme of the book. In this case it may be that the theme of 'death' is what the whole book since 1:2 has been building up to - this is the prime example of הַבֵּל, it is truly הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים.

The second difference we should note between 12:7 and 1:2, is the use of the definite form of קהלת:

הבל הבלים אמר	קהלת הבל הבלים הכל הבל	1:2
הבל הבלים אמר	<u>הקהלת</u> הכל הבל	12:8

## 5.9 12:9-14

It is usually maintained that 12:9-14 consists of two epilogues each starting with the word ויתר (vv.9-11,12-14). However, it will be proposed here (and defended in more detail later) that there is only one epilogue which divides into two equal halves (37 words in each), one of which centres on Qohelet and one of which centres on God:

FIRST HALF	
ויתר שהיה קהלת חכם	intro. – 4 words
עוד למד-דעת את-העם ואון וחקר תקן משלים הרבה	10 words
בקש קהלת למצא דברי-חפץ וכתוב ישר דברי אמת	centre – 9 words
דברי חכמים כדרבנות וכמשמרת נטועים בעלי אספות נתנו מרעה אחד	10 words
ויתר מהמה בני הזהר	concl. – 4 words
SECOND HALF	
עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ ולהג הרבה יגעת בשר סוף דבר הכל נשמע	13 words
את-האלהים ירא ואת-מצותיו שמור כי-זה כל-האדם	centre – 10 words
כי את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל-נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע	14 words

While the passage divides into these two halves, the division is not clearcut because the last four words of the first half connect both with what went before and with what comes after. Furthermore, while the focus at the beginning of v.9 is on Qohelet him- or herself, it shifts to 'words' after the second occurrence of קהלת in v.10 and this is the main focus up to the beginning of v.13 when there is another shift to 'God'. Thus the section of this passage dealing with 'words' crosses the division between the two halves, and also argues against the usual division into two epilogues.

Along with the change in focus from Qohelet to God, there is a change from third person description to exhortation in the second person. This is typical of the book.

The first and last lines of the first half of the epilogue are balanced not only in terms of the number of words, but in the number of letters as well:

ויתר שהיה קהלת חכם	v.9
ויתר מהמה בני הזהר	v.12

The rest of v.9 describes Qohelet's task as one of the wise, and the second half of v.10 extends this to the wise in general (or perhaps to wisdom *literature*). The first half of v.10 focuses on



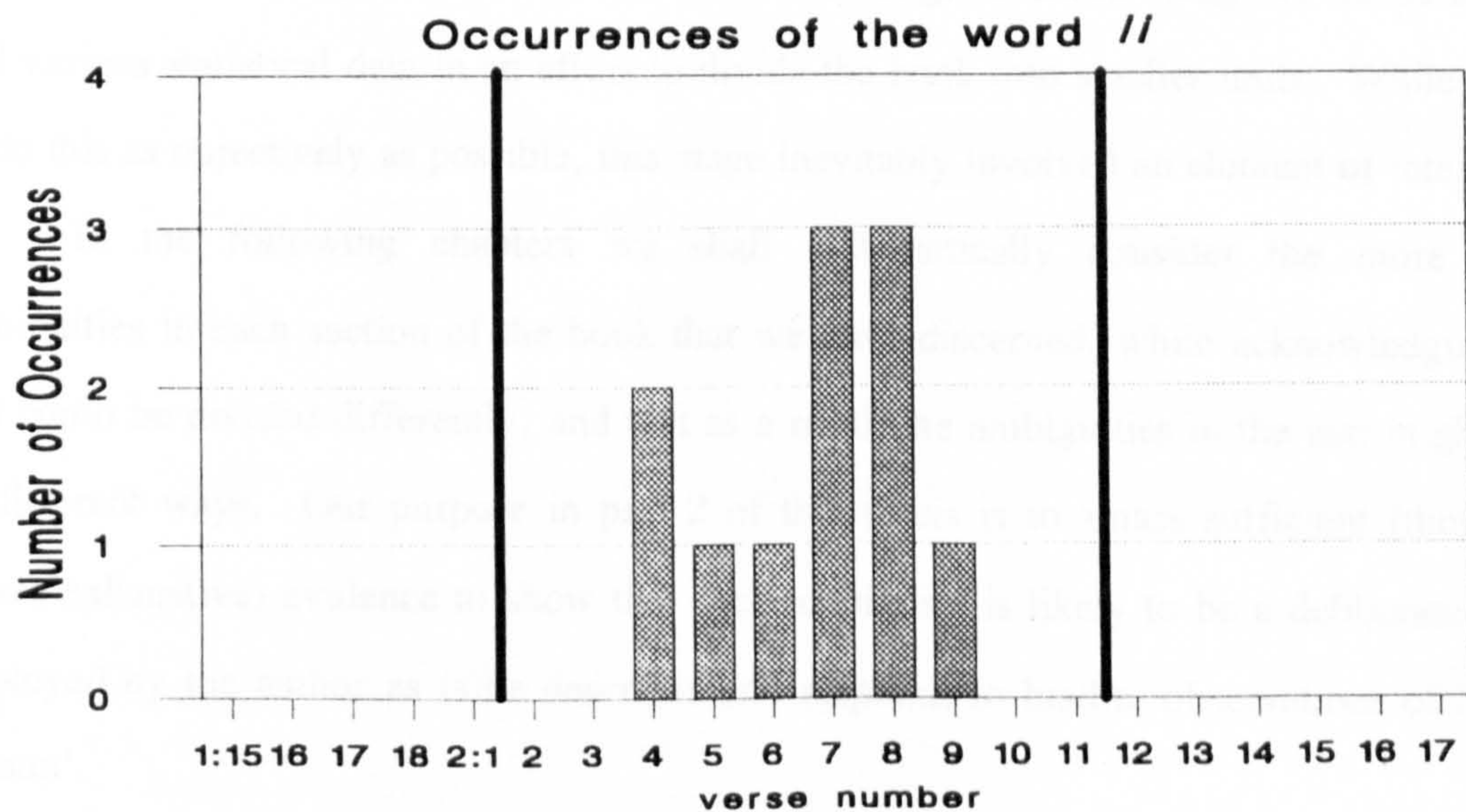
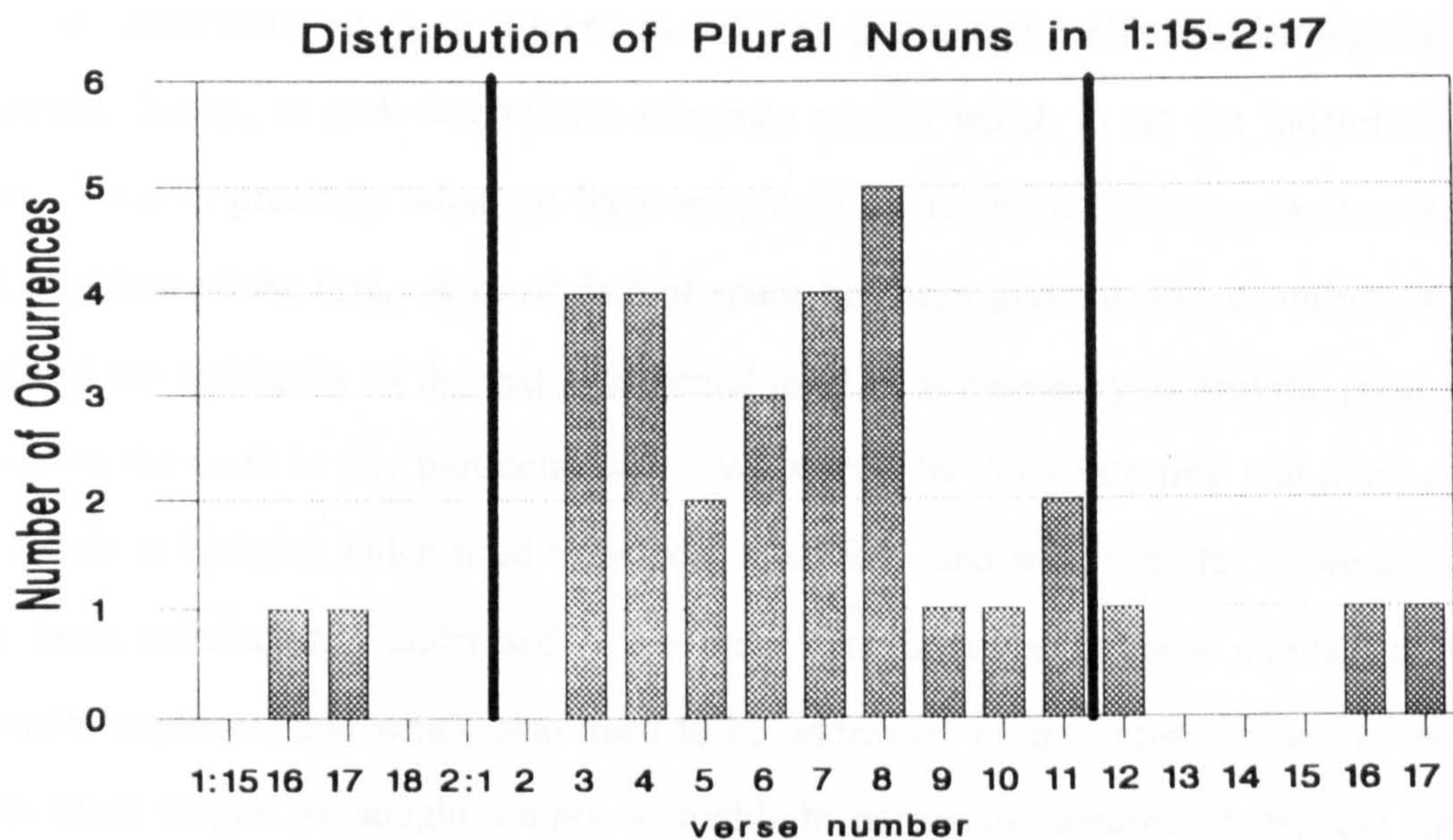
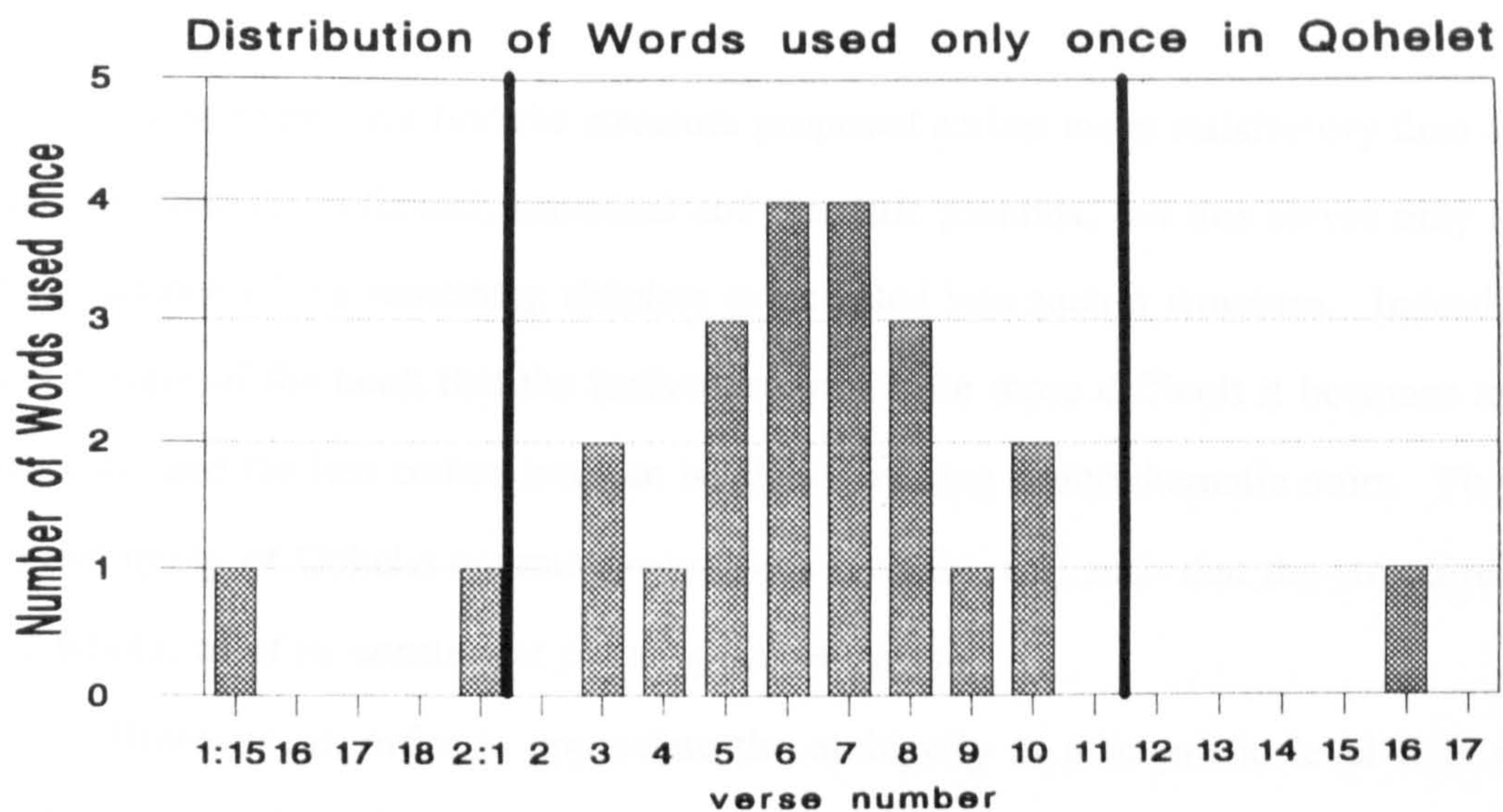
the task Qohelet undertook which is described in 1:2-12:8. The use twice of the word דברי alludes back to the superscription in 1:1.

The second half of the epilogue draws the book finally to a close - now that 'all has been heard'. It offers the author's conclusion in light of all that has gone before. The first line again appears to be a reference to 1:2-12:8, only this time somewhat less positive and it seems hardly to be designed to give the reader a great deal of confidence in the fruits of Qohelet's work. The remaining two lines then turn the focus onto God, issuing the final exhortation of the book. The comprehensiveness of the advice is emphasised by the use three times of the word כל - it applies to *all* people, and refers to *all* their deeds, including *all* those things which nobody else sees.

## CHAPTER 6, Conclusions: Structure and Ambiguity

The preceding chapters are the result not only of wide secondary reading on the formal and grammatical aspects of Qohelet, but also extremely detailed study of the BHS text of Qohelet assisted by statistical analysis using the computer programmes *LBase*, *Statgraphics* and *Cricketgraph*. This has enabled precise word and letter counts and thorough investigation of the use in Qohelet of different grammatical forms and constructions and of repeated words and phrases. It was such an analysis that led to the chiasmic structure proposed in ch.3 for 1:4-2:26. That is to say, this proposal is solidly founded on determinate schemata painstakingly derived from the text itself. However, the application of the same stringent methods to the rest of the book failed to reveal a similar overall structure, or even any other structures comparable in extent and intricacy. Many other patterns emerged, but, as our discussion of 4:17-5:6 illustrates well, the repetitions of words, phrases and themes is so complex that often a number of patterns can be discerned for the same passage. Moreover, when the text is divided differently other patterns may be found to support these divisions. Chs.1,2 were re-assessed in light of these conclusions and it became apparent that these chapters could also be divided in different ways, using repeated phrases to delineate the sections. To give just one example, it might be argued on the basis of theme, repeated words and statistical analysis that the section 2:4-10 should rather extend from v.2 to v.11. The theme of 'pleasure' is introduced by the question, *לשמחה מה-זה עשה*, in v.2, and vv.10,11 give the answer. Vv.3-9 then outline the author's search to find out what pleasure achieves. Moreover, v.2 introduces the word *עשה* which is a key word in the passage, and *כל-מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות* in v.11 summarises all that is described in vv.3-10. *גם-זה הבל*, or equivalent phrases, are regarded by some commentators as closing formulae, and we find the phrase in 2:1 and again in 2:11. It next occurs in 2:17 which could be taken to indicate that following section is 2:12-17. This would reveal another pattern: 2:1 uses the word *אמרתי*, as does the first verse of 2:2-11; 2:11 uses *ופניתי* as does the first verse of 2:12-17; 2:17 uses *ושנאתי* as does the first verse of 2:18-26. Even some of the statistics we amassed above to divide 2:4-10 from the passages either side of it might support this argument, as the graphs on the next page show (see pp.49-52).







Nonetheless, we find the structure proposed earlier more satisfactory than any other we have considered, on formal, statistical and thematic grounds, but this serves only to emphasise the resistance of the remaining chapters to be fitted into such a structure. Indeed, it seems to be a feature of the book that the further one reads the more difficult it becomes to discern the structure, and the less certain one can be about dividing it into thematic units. This means that the ambiguity of Qohelet operates even at the formal level, such that the structure of the book as a whole, as of its constituent parts, is indeterminate.

However, in order to appreciate the ambiguity at a linguistic level it is necessary to break the book down into manageable thematic units, and to try to discover the possible structure of these units so as to discern as fully as possible the effect of ambiguous words and phrases: that is, to seek determinate schemata against which to set the indeterminacies of the text. This is precisely what we have sought to do in the preceding chapters by meticulous examination of the text. A great deal of space has been given to this examination because, in light of the ambiguity of the text at a formal level, it is necessary to provide good evidence for dividing the book in any particular way. We started by demonstrating that there are a number of trends in Qohelet which need to be accounted for - and which, so far as we are aware, have not been satisfactorily addressed. We then went on to examine a number of themes that Qohelet explores, and which also need to be addressed in any interpretation of the book. At both these stages we sought simply to highlight particular features of the text rather than to give a particular interpretation of them. The next stage involved using the trends and themes and various statistical data in an effort to divide the book into smaller units. While we sought to do this as objectively as possible, this stage inevitably involved an element of interpretation.

In the following chapters we shall systematically consider the more important ambiguities in each section of the book that we have discerned, while acknowledging that the text could be divided differently, and that as a result the ambiguities in the text might function in different ways. Our purpose in part 2 of this thesis is to amass sufficient (though by no means exhaustive) evidence to show that such ambiguity is likely to be a deliberate technique employed by the author as (s)he describes and responds to his/her observations of life 'under the sun'.



## CHAPTER 7, The Introduction (1:1-3)

### 7.1 Commentary

These verses are vitally important to the interpretation of Qohelet, because they introduce some of the key words and themes of the book and give the reader his or her first impression of what it is about. However, the fact that each verse is ambiguous means that from the beginning the reader is engaged in a process of filling in gaps of indeterminacy to formulate 'meaning'. The way the reader understands the key words in these verses will play a major part in the way (s)he interprets the book as a whole - although (s)he may well modify the understanding of these words as the reading process continues.

#### 7.1.1 1:1

Most commentators view this verse as a late addition to Qohelet. In fact, Barton (1912:44) goes so far as to say,

The title, ch.1:1, 'The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem,' may readily be granted *without controversy* to be the work of an editor. [Our emphasis]

Many have suggested that it was added by the final editor as a claim to Solomonic authority, thus granting the work credence it would not otherwise have had. However, the verse has functioned as part of the book for many generations and is certainly part of Qohelet as it has come down to us in its canonical form. Moreover, it is quite possible that the author of this work deliberately wrote this 'heading' in the style of the headings given to other, probably older, and usually prophetic, works.

Whether or not this verse was added later as a heading or title to Qohelet, it already introduces a sense of enigma to the work and raises a number of issues. Of crucial importance is the question, 'who is קהלת?' 1:1 states that (s)he is בן-דוד, but there is no reference elsewhere to a son of David by this name. However, the term בן can refer to a more distant descendant, or even to a person related in some other way, for example as a disciple or pupil<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Crenshaw (1988:56) explains,

*Ben-dawid* (son of David) does not necessarily mean one of David's children. In Hebrew usage it can refer to grandchildren or simply to a remote member of the Davidic dynasty. Furthermore, the word *ben* also denotes close relationships of mind and spirit without implying actual physical kinship (sons of the prophets = disciples or guild members; sons of God = servants).

See also TDOT, pp.149-153.

12:12 provides an example of בן used in this way (cf בני-האדם in 1:13; 2:3,8; 3:10,18,19,21; 8:11; 9:3,12), while in 4:8 it is used of a son (cf 5:13 and 10:17). Perhaps Qohelet falls into the former category, so that 1:1 might be interpreted, 'The words of Qohelet, descendant/follower of David, king in Jerusalem.'

The most natural reading of the next phrase, מלך בירושלם, is as a description of Qohelet, 'The words of Qohelet [who is] David's son, [and is] king in Jerusalem.' This seems to be what is suggested by the pause indicated above ווד, but we will see later in the book that the sentence divisions sometimes hinder rather than aid interpretation. Moreover, there is no record of a king in Jerusalem by the name of Qohelet, so we might read the phrase as modifying ווד to give this interpretation of the first verse, 'The words of Qohelet, a descendant/follower of King David of Jerusalem.'

However, it should be noted that there are two roots מלך in the Hebrew Bible: one is associated with kingship, sovereignty, etc., the other with advice or counsel (see BDB, p.572-6). This has prompted some commentators to render the word here as 'counsellor'<sup>2</sup>. The only occurrence of this root that BDB cites is Neh 5:7 (where it appears with the root קהל). It is, though, a common Aramaic word and it may be that the first readers of the book were sufficiently well acquainted with that language to have detected an allusion here to this sense of the word<sup>3</sup>. The verse might then be interpreted, 'The words of Qohelet, descendant of David, an adviser in Jerusalem.' This interpretation ties in better with the description of Qohelet in 12:9-11, where (s)he is described as a wise person and may be one of a body known as 'the wise' - perhaps a group of people employed because of their wisdom as state advisers. It is particularly noteworthy that these verses use the word דברי three times, and this may specifically allude back to 1:1. Reading מלך as 'adviser' also accords with the tremendous emphasis on wisdom in the book, and the author's claims about his/her own great wisdom. Wisdom is not mentioned in the introductory three verses, but on the three other occasions that precisely the same word, דברי, is used in Qohelet<sup>4</sup> (9:17; 10:12,13) it is in the context of wisdom and folly.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Davidson (1986:7) and Albright (WIANE, p.15).

<sup>3</sup>On the assumption that the text was originally written in Aramaic, Ginsberg (1950:12ff) argues for derivation from another Aramaic word (not attested in MT) meaning 'possess', and renders the word 'property-owner'.

<sup>4</sup>דברי occurs in 1:8; 5:2,6; 6:11; 7:21; 10:14; דבריך in 5:1; and דבריי in 9:16. Only in 5:2; 9:16 and 10:14 are these 'words' specifically related to wisdom or folly.



If Qohelet is read against the background of other biblical literature, in other words if the other books of the Hebrew Bible are, to use Hawthorn's term, its main 'literary context', then מלך here is likely to be understood as 'king'. However, if its context is broader and includes Aramaic texts where מלך is readily understood to mean 'adviser', the verse may be understood quite differently. It is not a sufficient counter-argument to point out that elsewhere in Qohelet מלך clearly indicates a king (this probably applies to 8:2,4; 9:14) because the author of this book displays a propensity for using words with different meanings. Perhaps the word is deliberately ambiguous. If the author uses the reputation of Solomon's great wealth and wisdom around which to construct chs.1,2, it would be appropriate for the reader initially to understand this verse as an allusion to Solomon. However, the reader may in retrospect realise that Qohelet is not to be equated with Solomon, literal son of David and king in Jerusalem, and seek an alternative interpretation. Such ambiguity would also add an ironic twist to 4:13, 5:8 and 10:16-17,

טוב ילד מסכן וחכם ממלך זקן וכסיל אשר לא-ידע להזהר עוד	4:13
ויתרון ארץ בכל היא מלך לשדה נעבד	5:8
אי-לך ארץ שמלכך נער ושריך בבקר יאכלו	10:16
אשריך ארץ שמלכך בן-חורים ושריך בעת יאכלו בגבורה ולא בשתי	10:17

The reading which most commentators throughout the ages have accepted states that Qohelet was a king in Jerusalem who bore a filial relationship to David, and the only person who fits this description is Solomon. This seems to be borne out in Qoh 1:12 where Qohelet claims to have been king over Israel in Jerusalem, מלך על-ישראל בירושלם, although the possibility remains that (s)he is claiming to be an adviser over Israel. There were only two kings of Israel in Jerusalem, David and his son Solomon, before the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel separated<sup>5</sup>. This again points to Solomon as the source of the 'words'.

It may also be that the name קהלת is an allusion to Solomon. The word is a qal feminine participle from the root קהל, which has the meaning 'assemble'. The root is fairly common but the verb appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in the hiphil and niphal. The

<sup>5</sup>Rehoboam was briefly king over the whole of Israel, but his reign seemed to be from Shechem. When all of Israel apart from the tribe of Judah rebelled against him and adopted Jeroboam as their king, he returned to Jerusalem, there to reign over the southern kingdom of Judah. And, as 1 Kgs 12:19,20 states, "Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day...there was none that followed the house of David, but the tribe of Judah only."

noun קהל, 'assembly', is also common. RSV's 'preacher' is derived from the fact that קהל often refers to a religious assembly, so that Qohelet is reckoned to be one who addresses such an assembly (hence the Greek, *εκκλησιαστής*). But its scope is much greater than this, including assembly for evil counsel<sup>6</sup>, for civil affairs<sup>7</sup> and for war<sup>8</sup>; the assembly of the returning exiles<sup>9</sup> and the restored community<sup>10</sup>; a general assembled multitude<sup>11</sup>; and even in Ps 89:6 of the assembly of angels. Notably, the root is used several times in connection with Solomon, particularly in 1 Kgs ch.8 (and also in 2 Chr chs.5-7), and this passage may be alluded to by this unique name.

But why, if it is intended that the reader understand these as Solomon's words, are they not explicitly attributed to him? It may be that we are *not* expected to read the text in this way. Solomon is acclaimed in the Hebrew Bible for his superlative wealth and wisdom, and chs.1,2 of Qohelet seem specifically to allude to this reputation. But this enigmatic name might serve to prepare the reader for the discovery that the allusion to kingship is but a poetic tool to introduce her/him to the acme of life 'under the sun', which is dropped after chs.1,2. The author appears initially in the guise of King Solomon of Israel to initiate his/her examination of life, then discretely casts the persona aside as (s)he proceeds to explore other, less exalted aspects of the human lot. Perhaps in retrospect the reader might conclude that Qohelet is after all a counsellor or adviser of some sort rather than a king.

The word קהלת is used seven times in Qohelet. It has the form of a feminine participle, but five times (1:1,2,12; 12:9,10) it seems to act as a masculine proper noun. However, once (7:27) it takes a feminine verb which has prompted many commentators to posit an alternative reading, changing MT אמרה קהלת to אמר הקהלת. Once (12:8) it occurs as a definite masculine noun<sup>12</sup>. קהלת occurs three times in ch.1, apparently in the guise of King Solomon, once in ch.7, and three times in ch.12, where (s)he is described as one of the wise. Thus (s)he appears first in the introduction to the book, (s)he features again in the epilogue,

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Gen 49:6; Ps 26:5.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Job 30:28; Prov 5:14; 26:26.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Num 22:4; Judg 20:2; 1 Sam 17:47.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Jer 31:8; Neh 7:66.

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Ps 149:1; Ezra 10:12,14; Neh 8:2,17.

<sup>11</sup>E.g., Gen 28:3; 48:4; Prov 21:16.

<sup>12</sup>Murphy (1992:xx) suggests, 'Perhaps the best explanation recognizes that the feminine participle indicates an office associated with an assembly and that this term is used secondarily as a proper name.' Note that LXX also has the article in Qoh 1:2.



and otherwise his/her presence is indicated only by first person address, apart from one mention in the middle of the book as if to remind the reader who is speaking. In 1:2; 7:27; and 12:8 קהלת appears with the verb אמר, but on each occasions it takes a different form:

קהלת	אמר	1:2
קהלת	אמרה	7:27
קהלת	אמר	12:8

Either mistakes have crept into the text, as is usually suggested<sup>13</sup>, or this is another literary ploy to draw a veil of mystery over the character of our author. In view of the web of ambiguities which becomes ever more entangled over the next few chapters, the latter seems more probable<sup>14</sup>.

The first word of 1:1, דברי, is a common word which might easily be passed over quickly, but it deserves more careful consideration. The root from which it comes, דבר, has two distinct meanings in the Hebrew Bible - one to do with speech or words, the other with matters, affairs or business. Thirty-two words from the root are used in Qohelet and they seem sometimes to take one meaning, sometimes the other. On several occasions, however, either meaning would fit the context and the commentators are often divided on which is more appropriate in a particular verse. The choice can be an important one.

To translate דברי as 'the words' would *seem* to be more appropriate here. דבר appears as the first word in Hos., Joel, Mic. and Zeph., but in these cases it is 'the word of *Yahweh*' which is referred to: ...דבר-יהוה אשר היה אל-... Similar phrases are used at the beginning of Mal. and Jonah, while the books of Jer. and Amos open with precisely the same word with which Qohelet commences. Jer. starts, דברי ירמיהו בן-חלקיהו, then goes on in the second verse, אשר היה דבר-יהוה אליו. Amos starts, דברי עמוס, but proceeds to quote the words of *Yahweh*, frequently using the phrase אמר יהוה to indicate the source of דברי עמוס. Thus Qohelet is different to the prophetic literature in that there is no claim here to be relating the words of *Yahweh*. Is there, perhaps, a specific allusion to the opening words of the prophetic books and a deliberate omission of any reference to *Yahweh*? Possibly, but similar phrases

<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., Fox (1989:241); Gordis (1968:284); Ogden (1987:122); Schoors (1992:79-80); BHS (and LXX has ὁ Εκκλησιαστης at Qoh 7:27). In fact Whybray (1989:126) says of אמרה קהלת in 7:27, 'the verb is feminine; but all commentators agree that this is an error due to wrong word-division.' [Our emphasis]

<sup>14</sup>Schoors (1992:32) notes the use of הקהלת in 12:8, as opposed to the defective form קהלת used elsewhere in the book, as an example of the author's irregular use of vowels. He states that 'in a total of 242 instances, where an internal *scriptio plena* was possible, only 127 have it, whereas 115 have a defective writing.'

occur in Prov. with no specific reference to Yahweh: 30:1 opens, דברי אגור בן-יקה המשא, and 31:1 starts with the words, דברי למואל מלך משא.

The opening verse of Prov. also bears some striking resemblances to Qoh 1:1, although it uses the word משלי instead of דברי. Moreover, as Crenshaw (1988:56) points out, 'the epilogue in Eccl. 12:9-11 virtually equates the respective words *dibre* and *mesalim*.' Comparing Prov 1:1, משלי שלמה בן-דוד מלך ישראל, with Qoh 1:1, דברי קהלת בן-דוד מלך בירושלם, and also with Qoh 1:12, אני קהלת הייתי מלך על-ישראל בירושלם, there is sufficient similarity between the verses to cause a reader well acquainted with both books to make comparisons, while the differences may raise doubts about Solomon being the source of the latter. Wilson (1984:179) argues,

the striking similarities between the initial superscript of Qohelet and that of Proverbs produce two effects on the reader's understanding of the book of Qohelet and the identity of its author ... First, the otherwise unidentified author, Qohelet, is here connected with the person Solomon ... Second, the addition of such a superscription to Qohelet serves to associate the book with the collection process that produced the divisions marked by similar editorial comments in Proverbs.

The phrase ויתר דברי is used regularly in 1 and 2 Kgs.<sup>15</sup> (and a few times in 1 and 2 Chr.<sup>16</sup>), but in this case it is usually taken to be related to the second meaning of דבר discussed above (e.g., 'acts' in RSV). This is particularly noteworthy in light of the importance in Qohelet of words from the root יתר. The expression occurs with reference to Solomon in 1 Kgs 11:41, a verse that also uses the words עשה and חכם, which are important in Qohelet, ויתר דברי שלמה וכל-אשר עשה וחכמתו הלוא-הם כתבים על-ספר דברי שלמה. Crenshaw says of this verse (1988:56),

The reference to a book of Solomon's *debarim* (I Kings 11:41) seems to play on the word's ambiguity. Does the allusion presuppose an account of Solomon's words or of his deeds? 'Now the rest of Solomon's *debarim* - everything he did and (all) his wisdom - are they not written in the book of Solomon's *debarim*?'

Perhaps the opening verse in Qohelet also plays on the word's ambiguity, and may even allude to this verse in 1 Kgs.

<sup>15</sup>E.g., 1 Kgs 11:41; 14:19,29; 15:7,23,31; 16:5,14,20,27.

<sup>16</sup>E.g., 2 Chr 13:22; 20:34; 25:26; 26:22; 27:7; 28:26; 32:32; 33:18; 35:26; 36:8.



## 7.1.2 1:2

Most commentators agree that **הבל** is a key word in Qohelet, and that the way 1:2 is understood is important for interpretation of the whole book<sup>17</sup>. This seems reasonable in view of the role 1:2 and 12:8 seem to play as an *inclusio* to the book, and the use of **הבל** in what appear to be summarising or concluding statements elsewhere in the book - although it should be noted that after a high concentration of such statements in chs.1,2 they gradually peter out in the later chapters. Crenshaw (1988:59), for example, says of the 'motto' **הבל הבלים**,

The function of the motto is to *guide the reader toward a proper interpretation* of Qohelet's words. He will validate this thesis in what follows, and that includes everything Qohelet says, including his advice to enjoy life insofar as possible. [Our emphasis]

Similarly, Fox (1989:168) writes about the reading process in which this phrase plays its role,

The book's motto is a thesis that we can expect to see validated by the following monologue, and which by this expectation *controls the way we read*. Thus, for example, after reading 1:2 no one would take 1:4-7 as a celebration of the stability of the natural order. Instead we immediately ask: what is *hebel* about these natural processes? At the same time, we start to redefine *hebel* in accordance with what we read and will continue to do so throughout. [Our emphasis]

However, if the motto 'controls the way we read' and is to 'guide the reader toward a proper interpretation of Qohelet's words', (s)he must come to some decision about what the word **הבל** means. This is one key point in Qohelet at which the reader is required to fill in a gap of indeterminacy, and, if the different translations of **הבל** are anything to go by, there is considerable scope for different interpretations of this word. A study of different modern English translations of **הבל הבלים הכל הבל** gives some indication of the problem. The RSV (and the NRSV) translates the phrase, 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity;' the NEB reads, 'Emptiness, emptiness, all is emptiness;' while the REB (and the JB and the NJPS are similar) modifies this to, 'Futility, utter futility, everything is futile;' the NIV is different again, 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!'; and the GNB renders the clause thus: 'Life is useless, all useless.' The words 'vanity', 'emptiness', 'futility', 'meaningless' and 'useless' have *some* similarity in meaning, but they are far from being identical. Moreover, if the word **הבל** is to be understood as a, if not *the*, key word in the book, the difference in meaning between these words proves to be very important.

<sup>17</sup>Ogden (1987:28), for example, asserts that we should be as clear as possible about the meaning of the word, for the way in which we interpret it will profoundly affect our understanding of Qoheleth's message.

More recently, Fredericks (1993:14-5) has expressed similar sentiments,

Of course any reading of Ecclesiastes is based on one's estimation of this key word, and as it is used metaphorically in the book, it has inevitably become a subject of controversy.

The problem is compounded when the commentaries are taken into consideration. Ogden (1987:17-22) devotes an appendix to 'The Meaning of the Term *Hebel*,' and states (1987:19) that,

in its occurrences outside Qoheleth, *hebel* means something equivalent to 'vanity', 'nothingness', 'vapour'. This is the sense we discover from its uses in Deut. 32.21; Isa. 57.13; Jer. 8.19; 10.8; 51.18; Prov. 13.11; 21.6; Ps. 78.33, and many others; it addresses the notion of the uselessness, the powerlessness of the idols, and the fruitlessness of much human endeavour.

This concurs with BDB (p.210-1) which gives the meanings of הָבֵל as 1) vapour, breath, *fig* vanity; and 2) *fig* of what is evanescent, unsubstantial, worthless, vanity. However, after a study of the contexts in which this word is found in Qohelet, Ogden (1987:22) comes to the conclusion that

the term *hebel* in Qoheleth has a distinctive function and meaning: it conveys the notion that life is enigmatic, and mysterious; that there are many unanswered and unanswerable questions.

Crenshaw (1988:57), in a commentary published the year after Ogden's book, maintains that in Qohelet the word הָבֵל 'shows two nuances: temporal ('ephemerality') and existential ('futility' or 'absurdity')'. He continues (1988:58),

The first category, breath or vapour, is reinforced by the image of chasing or herding the wind (cf. 2:17). Wind, breath, and smoke are insubstantial when viewed from one perspective. Nevertheless, they are very real, even if one cannot see the wind or take hold of any one of the three. Although Qohelet and the person who wrote the inclusio normally prefer the second sense of *hebel*, this preference is not exclusive. Several uses in the book virtually demand the first meaning, that of fleeting appearance and ephemerality.

His own translation of the inclusio is, 'Utter futility! Everything is futile!'<sup>18</sup> Crenshaw seems to see the meaning of הָבֵל in Qohelet as being much more closely tied to the other uses in the Hebrew Bible than does Ogden.

Fox, in a book published the following year, uses the second word which Crenshaw suggested in his second category above when he translates the phrase as 'Utterly absurd. Everything is absurd.' But he goes on to say (1989:46), 'Nevertheless, the use of *hebel* in Qohelet is distinctive; nowhere else is *hebel* predicated of an event', and he argues (1989:36) that 'The *hebel* leitmotif disintegrates if the word is assigned several different meanings.'

Michel also published a book on Qohelet in 1989, suggests (1989:44) the word 'absurd' (*Absurdität*) as a translation for *hebel*, and like Fox draws attention to the use of the word

<sup>18</sup>Similarly, Kidner (1976:22) argues, 'In terms we use today the summing up could be,  
'Utter futility..., utter futility!  
The whole thing is futile.'



'absurd' by Albert Camus. However, Michel interprets absurdity in terms of 'meaninglessness' (*Sinnlosigkeit*), saying (1989:44), 'Ich schlage deshalb vor, הבל in den Erörterungen Qohelets durch "absurd" im Sinne von "sinnlos" wiederzugeben.' He explains (1989:44-5),

Durch das Fremdwort 'absurd' soll ins Bewußtsein gehoben werden, daß die Ausführungen Qohelets im Kern philosophischer Natur sind: die Weisheit basiert auf der Überzeugung, daß die von Gott in die Welt hineingelegten Gesetzmäßigkeiten und damit der Sinn des Geschehens vom Weisen erkannt werden können und sollen. Qohelet vertritt im Gegensatz zu diesem erkenntnistheoretischen Optimismus einen erkenntnistheoretischen Skeptizismus mit der Grundthese, daß der Mensch in dem Geschehen unter der Sonne keinen Sinn finden könne.

This is similar to Barucq (1968:55-6), who also translates הבל as 'absurd' (*absurdité*), arguing that 'il est bien entendu que Dieu en dirige le sens mais l'homme ne perce pas le mystère de cette action. C'est la faillite de la sagesse'. Barucq and Michel clearly use 'absurd' differently to Fox who responds (1989:36) to Barucq's statement thus:

While Qohelet would agree with this statement, it is not what he means by the word *hebel*. As I see it, *hebel* designates not the mysterious but rather (and this is a fundamental difference) *the manifestly irrational or meaningless*. To call something *hebel* is an evaluation of its nature. Whether or not there is meaning beyond the visible surface of events, that surface, which is the world as it presents itself to humans, is warped. Similarly, while *hebel* is a near-synonym of "meaningless", the terms differ insofar as "absurd" is not merely the absence of meaning, but an active violation of meaningfulness. [His emphasis]

This stands in sharp contrast to Michel's assertion (1989:43), 'Wenn man Qohelet klassifizieren will, so darf man ihn also *nicht einen Pessimisten nennen*, sondern einen Skeptiker im Blick auf die erkennbarkeit der Welt' [our emphasis].

In another commentary written in 1989, Whybray concurs with the RSV translation in reading הבל as 'vanity'<sup>19</sup>. But he suggests (1989a:35) that the inclusio was written by an editor who did not correctly represent Qohelet's own views<sup>20</sup>,

Elsewhere Qoheleth never employs this extremely emphatic form of speech, nor does he speak in such a general way of *everything* as 'vanity': he applies the word only to specific, clearly defined situations [sic!]. Consequently it cannot be affirmed with certainty that v.2 expresses Qoheleth's own thought: the verse is undoubtedly an *interpretation* of his thought, but may well be a *misunderstanding* or at least an over-simplification of it. [His emphasis]

What, then, can we conclude from a comparison of the treatment in these recent commentaries by Ogden, Crenshaw, Fox, Michel and Whybray - which were published within

<sup>19</sup>So also, for example, Barton, 1912:69; Bergant, 1982:229; Eaton, 1983:56; Davidson, 1986:6; Ellul, 1990:51-53; Gordis, 1968:146,204-5; Johnson, 1982:96-7; Leupold, 1952:37; Loader, 1986:19-20. Murphy (1992:lix) argues, "'Vanity" is certainly not the best rendering, but I am using it as a code word in the translation in order to call attention to הבל as it occurs in the book.'

<sup>20</sup>Murphy (1992:xxxiii) also suggests that the inclusio may be editorial.

three years of each other - of the word הָבֵל? Perhaps the first thing to note is that the commentators give us four *different* translations of the word: 'enigmatic' (enigma), 'futile' (futility), 'absurd' (absurdity) and 'vanity', and 'absurd' seems to be used in two different ways. Crenshaw and Fox agree that הָבֵל (translated as 'futile' and 'absurd' respectively) is Qohelet's negative assessment of הָכֵל, but while Fox thinks that Qohelet is consistent in his use of the word, Crenshaw finds two different 'nuances'. Fox and Ogden agree that the use of הָבֵל in Qohelet is distinct from the rest of the Hebrew Bible, but while Fox sees it as a negative assessment of הָכֵל, Ogden sees it as a neutral term ('enigmatic') to describe what is beyond human comprehension. Fox and Michel both render הָבֵל as 'absurd', but they understand absurdity differently, it being a decidedly pessimistic term for Fox, but not for Michel. Whybray agrees with Crenshaw and Fox in seeing הָבֵל as a negative term, but does not agree that Qohelet would use the superlative הָבֵל הַבְּלִים.

There are a number of commentators who attempt to render the word in a literal rather than a figurative sense. Thus Scott (1965:209) translates 1:2, 'Breath of a breath! (says Qoheleth). The slightest breath! All is a breath!'; Fredericks (1993:11) renders it, 'Breath of breaths, utter breath, all is breath'; and Farmer (1991:152), along similar lines, renders the second half of the verse, 'the most breathlike of all breaths.' The root הָבֵל occurs a total of thirty-eight times in Qohelet, and only forty times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Of the latter, it is only once used unambiguously as a noun meaning 'breath' or 'vapour': in Isa 57:13 where it is used parallel to רוּחַ. It is used a further thirteen times<sup>21</sup> as an adjective or adverb which could be translated 'breath-like' or 'vapour-like' (though different aspects of 'breathlikeness' are appropriate in different verses). On another eleven occasions (all within the Wisdom Literature<sup>22</sup>) הָבֵל is used as a noun which forms the basis of a comparison, thus effecting the notion of breathlikeness in another way. There are eleven occurrences<sup>23</sup> of nominal forms of הָבֵל which refer to idols or false (vapour-like?) gods, with two occurrences of verbal forms (in identical verses in 2 Kgs 17:15 and Jer 2:5) modifying a nominal form of the root (perhaps emphasising the ephemerality of these idols). Another twice<sup>24</sup> verbal forms

<sup>21</sup>Isa 30:7; 49:4; Jer 10:3,15; 16:19; 51:18; Zech 10:2; Job 9:29; 21:34; 27:12; 35:16; Prov 31:30; Lam 4:17.

Some of these could also be read as nouns, but they would still serve much the same function.

<sup>22</sup>Pss 39:6,7,12; 62:10,10; 78:3; 94:11; 144:4; Job 7:16; Prov 13:11; 21:6.

<sup>23</sup>Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13,26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8; 14:22; 23:16; Jonah 2:9; Ps 31:7.

<sup>24</sup>Ps 62:11; Job 27:12.



appear: one of these is a negative imperative not to be הבל, the other is a question posed by Job to his 'friends' asking why they have become הבל (and both of these are in the Wisdom Literature). The name Abel is the same word הבל, and this name probably indicates the transience of Abel's life - although it could also be argued that it indicates absurdity, futility or meaninglessness. Ellul (1990:58) asserts that the story of Abel should be taken into account when considering the word הבל in Qohelet:

When Qohelet read Genesis 4, clearly he knew all the meanings of the word. Abel was mist, breath, or smoke that melts away; his name predicted all the rest of his tragic life ... All is vanity, but not just in the sense we have detected. Beyond what we have seen, all is Abel: that is, condemned beforehand, just like Abel. Everything bears Abel's name. Here we see an aspect of Qohelet's intransigence: everything that we see as power, grandeur, success - all this belongs in advance to the category of vanity. It is all condemned to disappear, to vanish, without any kind of posterity<sup>25</sup>.

From this survey of the occurrences of הבל in the Hebrew Bible two clear semantic threads can be drawn. The first arises from the use of words from this root to describe things as in some way breathlike, vaporous or ephemeral. The second probably derives from this: the use of הבל either specifically to refer to false gods (or, in some cases, possibly false teaching), or in contexts where false gods are being described. These are the semantic fields we should bring to bear on this word in Qoh 1:2.

It should be noted that the plural noun<sup>26</sup> in its absolute and construct forms is *only* used of false gods (two of these in construct with שוא meaning vain or empty)<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, although הבל הבלים appears to be 'the genitive expressive of the superlative idea'<sup>28</sup> (Barton, 1912:72<sup>29</sup>), it is also possible that הבלים is a plural noun meaning 'false gods' which is

<sup>25</sup>Ellul quotes Neher (*Notes sur Qohélet (L'Ecclésiaste)*. Paris: Minuit, 1951), who finds reference also to Cain and Seth in Qohelet. Ellul (1990:59) writes,

Remarkably, Neher shows that Cain is also present in Qohelet, in chapter 2: when all the great works are described, they are designated by the verb *qanah* (2:7), the root of the name 'Cain' (heb. *qayin*) ... Qohelet declares that Cain's great accomplishments of acquisition also are *hebel*: Abel, or vanity! Actually, we all are children of Abel. Seth, representing all of humanity, replaces Abel ... This idea gives us the key, Neher believes, to a difficult verse, which he translates: 'I have seen all who live, who walk under the sun: with the second child, the one who stands in his place' (4:15). So all who live walk with Abel, and with Seth, who stands in his place.

See also the discussion in Clemens (1994:7) about the connections between Qohelet and Gen 1-4.

<sup>26</sup>Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13,26; Jer 8:19; 10:8; 14:22; 23:16; Jonah 2:9; Ps 31:7.

<sup>27</sup>This point is noted by Ellul (1990:52).

<sup>28</sup>The form of הבל here, pointed with ְ and ִ rather than ְ under both consonants, is a peculiar form for a segholate construct. This has led Barton (1912:72) among others, to perceive it as an Aramaic form. However, Fredericks (1988:222) disputes this argument and indicates 'forms with this reduction in the first vowel of segholates [which] occur in early and late Biblical Hebrew whether Aramaisms or not.' He also contends that 'to see an Aramaism in a word's vocalization alone is dubious in the first place, and especially in Qoh.' Schoors (1992:75) comments, 'the *q<sup>e</sup>tel* form of הבל is unique, and could still be influenced by Aramiac. But does it tell us about the language of Qoh or of the *punctatores*?'

<sup>29</sup>Barton draws attention to קדש קדשים in Exod 29:37, עבר עברים in Gen 9:25, שיר השירים in Cant 1:1 and שמי השמים in 1 Kgs 8:27.

modified by הבל. Ps 62:10 gives us an example of this kind of construction: אך הבל בני-אדם, where the plural בני-אדם is described as הבל. Following this reading, הבל would also refer to these false gods so that the final clause, הבל הבלים could be read 'all of them (i.e. the false gods) are *hebel*'. An example of this type is found in Ps 94:11 which ends, המה הבל.

This gives us two possible readings for this verse (using at this stage as general a translation as possible for הבל), "'Supremely vapour-like," says Qohelet, "supremely vapour-like, everything is vapour-like;" or, "'False gods are a vapour (or vapour-like)," says Qohelet, "false gods are a vapour - they are all a vapour"'.

The problem in the first reading is to determine what being 'vapour-like' indicates. Does it mean that things are ephemeral because they have no real substance? Does it mean they are incomprehensible because their meaning cannot be grasped? Does it mean they are ultimately futile because they have no lasting value? Does it mean they are absurd in the sense that they are an offense to human reason? There is considerable room for interpretation: the precise implications of the word הבל are as difficult to take hold of as is vapour or breath, so that the meaning of this key verse is itself 'vapour-like'. In this sense, הבל might be *interpreted* as 'ambiguous/ambiguity' (we are *not* offering this as a translation of the word), because just as a vapour or one's breath cannot be tied down, so the key phrase הבל הבלים and the book it introduces resist the reader's (and the commentator's) attempt to find a definitive meaning. This ties in with Seybold's comment (TDOT,3:315), 'the range of meaning of *hebel* is open. It has a broad emotion-laden stratum with strong evocative possibilities.'

However, the interpretive strategy adopted for this thesis places the restriction upon interpretation that it must conform to the semantic range of the words of the text, either singly or in combination. Therefore, while there are a number of possibilities for translation of הבל and the phrases in which it appears, this strategy demands that the interpretation of this word must display something of the qualities of vapour or breath, even though that be in a somewhat extended or figurative sense. For example, the way in which Fox uses 'absurd' is, we would suggest, inappropriate as an interpretation of הבל. He claims that the motto (and the expectation to see it validated) 'controls the way we read', and then grants that we 'redefine *hebel* in accordance with what we read' (1989:168). But when he translates הבל as 'absurd', it seems to be derived totally from the way he has read Qohelet, and to have nothing whatsoever to do



with the inherent semantic properties of the word. He claims (1989:30),

while the ephemerality of vapour is relevant to the way Qohelet applies *hebel* in some verses (e.g. 3:19 and 11:10), *no quality of vapour* can be applied to the situations that he calls *hebel*. [Our emphasis]

He then proceeds (1989:31) to define 'absurd' in a way that does entail 'no quality of vapour',

The essence of the absurd is a disparity between two phenomena that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are actually disjunct or even conflicting. The absurd is irrational, an affront to reason, in the broad sense of the human faculty that seeks and discovers order in the world about us. The quality of absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or event in and of itself (though these may, by extension, be called absurd), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.

Certainly 'absurd' so defined is an apt description of the world as Fox understands Qohelet to view it, but how can the motto be said to *control* the way we read when its meaning is so clearly *controlled by* the way we read? Rather than the motto controlling the way the book is read, it seems that it provides a gap for the reader to fill in, the gap being restricted only by the semantic range of the word **הבל**. Good's article on Qoh 1:2-11 is a good example of a reading which appreciates the ambiguity of **הבל**, and as a result is reticent about too hastily making a decision concerning its interpretation. He explains his approach thus (1978:64),

I have so far sought to avoid firm conclusions, for the good reason that every expression appears to have more than one possible meaning. The linear mode of interpretation works best if one resists haste in making decisions but, reading with care, ponders possibilities and remains in suspense of conviction.

He later refers specifically to **הבל**, saying (1978:71),

Even the motto with which the poem began is left in the poem *without determinate meaning* ... The meaning of *hebel*, then, must be discovered progressively by following it through the rest of Qoheleth's essay ... we must rest content with hypothesis about *hebel* from this poem. [Our emphasis]

This is precisely the point: the meaning of the key word **הבל**, and the so-called motto in which it appears, is ambiguous because it may be interpreted in more than one way and thus provides a gap of indeterminacy. However, Good assumes that if the reader suspends judgment the meaning will become clear as the reading process continues. But this is not the case in Qohelet because the ambiguity of **הבל**, and other key words, phrases and concepts, is maintained throughout the book.

The expression **הכל הבל** occurs six times. Two of these are in the inclusio in 1:2 and 12:8. On a further three occasions it occurs in the phrase **הכל הבל ורעות רוח**. We noted above that this phrase in 2:11 and 2:17 is part of the inclusio to section B' of chs.1,2, and also serves as an inclusio for sections B, C and B'. In each instance it immediately follows a phrase describing deeds that are done. How, then, are these deeds being viewed? Are they

ephemeral in that they have no lasting substance? Are they futile because they ultimately have no value? Are they absurd? Or is the author not specifically describing the deeds at all? (S)he could be saying that the situation in which these deeds are performed is הבל. The text may be read in any of these ways.

The other occurrence of הכל הבל is in 3:19, near the centre of a passage which states that humans and beasts meet the same fate, death. It is the first of three statements starting with the word הבל:

כי  
הכל הבל  
הכל הולך אל-מקום אחד  
הכל היה מן-העפר והכל שב אל-העפר

הכל is different here because, while it *could* mean 'all' as it does elsewhere, in the context it seems to refer to 'both' humans and beasts<sup>30</sup>. In this context הבל appears to indicate transience, as even some of those commentators who translate it differently elsewhere concede. Thus Crenshaw (1988:104) writes,

the meaning of *habel* would probably be 'fleeting', 'ephemeral', or 'transcient'. This understanding provides an element of surprise, since the refrain's previous uses had the sense of futility.

Fox (1989:42) also concedes that 'If *hakkol* in 3:19 means 'both' man and beast, then 'ephemeral', rather than 'absurd', could be the best translation of *hebel* here.'

Of the six occurrences of the phrase הכל הבל, then, only one seems to demand a particular interpretation - 'ephemeral' in 3:19.

The phrase גם-זה-הבל (and one occurrence of זה-הבל in 6:2, and of גם-הוא הבל in 2:1) occurs fifteen times. In most cases it is unclear precisely what is referred to: as Fox (1989:38) puts it,

it is frequently difficult, sometimes virtually impossible, to identify the antecedents of the pronouns in the *hebel*-judgment. Thus in particular cases it is uncertain exactly what is being judged.

In 2:1, גם-הוא הבל could refer to the masculine noun טוב, which is itself somewhat ambiguous, perhaps meaning 'good', or 'pleasure' or 'prosperity'; or it might refer to the testing of pleasure. גם-זה הבל in 2:15 could relate to Qohelet's great or excessive wisdom; or to the fact that he will ultimately meet the same fate as the fool; or it might point forward to the observation in v.16 that there is no more remembrance of the wise than the foolish. In 2:19

<sup>30</sup>See also the similar clause at the end of 6:6.



הבל may refer to all the work which Qohelet did; or to the profit (s)he made from it; or to the fact that someone else will take possession of it. The same applies in 2:21 where again הבל could refer to the 'portion' (חלק); or to the fact that someone who did not work for it gets the portion; or to the observation that a person worked with wisdom, knowledge and skill just to give his portion to someone else. In each case, if a *specific noun* is referred to, a translation of 'ephemeral' or 'transcient' seems more appropriate, but if it is the *situation* that is being described, something like 'meaningless', 'futile' or 'absurd' would be more fitting. However, in 2:23 it seems to be the situation in which כל-ימיו מכאבים וכעס ענינו גם-בלילה לא-שכב לבו that is described as הבל, and, in contrast to 3:19, 'meaningless' or 'futile' seems a more appropriate translation than 'transcient' or 'ephemeral'.

In 2:26 it may be the fact of the sinner gathering to give to the 'good' that is described as הבל; or it may be the whole situation described in the verse where God gives wisdom, knowledge and pleasure to the 'good' and the task of gathering for the 'good' to the sinner; or גם-זה הבל ורעה רבה in 2:21, either to further heighten the contrast between human wisdom and knowledge and that given by God, or to indicate that even the wisdom and knowledge given by God is הבל. The phrase in 2:26 could also, as we observed above, serve as a conclusion to the whole of chs.1,2, and its ambiguity serves to cast a shadow of doubt over the seemingly positive end to these chapters.

Precisely the same phrase that occurs at the end of ch.2 is found again in 4:4 where it could refer either to man's jealousy (or perhaps zealousness); or to all work or profit and the skill used in doing or achieving it; or to the situation where this work or profit results from jealousy or (zealousness). 4:8 is complicated by the fact that it changes from third to first person half way through the verse. Is the first person an error, or is it an aside, or is it perhaps the author's way of indicating that (s)he is the person referred to earlier in the verse? And to which part of the verse does הבל relate? Is it טובה that is being described as הבל? - although this does not seem to tie in with the last word of the verse, הוא; or is it the author's depriving her- or himself of טובה that is הבל; or, if the first person section is an aside, does הבל refer to the earlier part of the verse where someone is said not to be satisfied with his/her wealth; or is it related to the fact that there is no end to all his/her work; or is it a response to the whole

verse introduced by the observation at the beginning of a person who has neither son nor brother?

4:16 is noteworthy because the phrase with which it ends is different from 2:26 and 4:4 (and 6:9): גם-זה הבל ורעיון רוח. גם-זה הבל ורעיון רוח occurs elsewhere only in 1:17, but there too the phrase is different:

1:17 גם-זה הוא רעיון רוח  
4:16 גם-זה הבל ורעיון רוח

There is no apparent difference between this phrase and the more common רעות רוח, but its use may lead the reader to question whether or not the phrases are synonymous. There are a number of other questions which the verses raises: Who does 'them' at the end of לפניהם refer to? Who is 'he' in whom those who come after will not rejoice? Is לפניהם to be read spatially as in 2:26,26; 3:14; 5:1,5; 7:26; 8:12,13; 10:5; or temporally as in 1:10,16; 2:7,9 (the same question arises over precisely the same word in 9:1 - the only other time it is used)? The verse illustrates well Qohelet's propensity for using different words to mean the same thing and the same word to indicate different things, and this exacerbates the problem of establishing what it is that הבל refers to.

In the same way that there is a link between גם-זה הבל in 2:21,26, a link could be established between גם-זה הבל in 4:8,16, and again the two clauses in which it appears are different:

4:8 גם-זה הבל וענין רע הוא  
4:16 כי- גם-זה הבל ורעיון רוח

In 5:9 גם-זה הבל could refer either specifically to תבואה - which might explain why the lover of money is not satisfied with it - or to the situation where the one who loves abundance does not receive any income. If Qohelet could be relied on for adherence to normal grammatical practice, the first could be ruled out because the masculine זה does not agree with the feminine תבואה. However, there are many grammatical anomalies in the book<sup>31</sup>.

6:2 is the only occasion when זה הבל is used without גם. It occurs in a clause which could be compared to 4:8 thus:

4:8 גם- זה הבל וענין רע הוא  
6:2 זה הבל וחלי רע הוא

<sup>31</sup>The most detailed examination of these to date is the study by Schoors (1992).



The verse is in some respects similar to 2:26 which also focuses on what God gives, and also describes someone losing what they work for to another person. And some similar questions arise in relation to the word הבל: does it refer specifically to the fact of a stranger enjoying the man's (sic) wealth, or to the man's inability to enjoy it himself, or to the whole situation?

We noted above that גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח occurs at the centre of the book in 6:9. הבל here could refer to הלך-נפש, or to the 'better than' saying which makes up the first half of the verse. It may also serve as the conclusion to the section from 6:7-9, and perhaps also as a conclusion to the whole of the first half of the book.

The remaining occurrences of the phrase גם-זה הבל are all at the end of verses - 6:9, the end of the first half of the book, is the last time the phrase is added to as it and הכל הבל are on a number of occasions in the first half:

ורעות רוח	הכל הבל	1:14
	גם-הוא הבל	2:1
ורעות רוח	הכל הבל	2:11
	גם-זה הבל	2:15
ורעות רוח	הכל הבל	2:17
	גם-זה הבל	2:19
ורעה רבה	גם-זה הבל	2:21
	גם-זה הבל הוא	2:23
ורעות רוח	גם-זה הבל	2:26
	הכל הבל	3:19
ורעות רוח	גם-זה הבל	4:4
וענין רע הוא	גם-זה הבל	4:8
ורעיון רוח	גם-זה הבל	4:16
	גם-זה הבל	5:9
וחלי רע הוא	זה הבל	6:2
ורעות רוח	גם-זה הבל	6:9
	גם-זה הבל	7:6
	גם-זה הבל	8:10
	גם-זה הבל	8:14

There is a tight alternating pattern in sections B, C and B' of chs.1,2, but the pattern gradually disintegrates as the book progresses, totally disappearing in the second half.

טוב מן-הבל in 7:6 may refer specifically to the laughter of fools, or may relate to the טוב מן- saying in v.5, 'Better to listen to a wise person's rebuke, than for a man to listen to the singing of fools ... but even this is hebel.'

8:10 is a difficult verse which complicates the task of determining to what הבל might refer. Again it may relate specifically to the preceding clause - whoever it is that is forgotten, or it may relate to the verse as a whole.

The final occurrence of the phrase גם-זה הבל is in 8:14, where the author describes a situation in which what happens to the righteous would be appropriate for those who commit

evil acts, and what happens to the wicked would be appropriate for those who commit righteous acts.

Only once in the first half of Qohelet does the word *הבל* occur outwith the inclusio or the phrases *הכל הבל* and *גם-זה הבל* (or *גם-הוא הבל*, or *זה הבל*). This is in 4:7 where the author says, 'I saw (a) *hebel*'. In this instance something like 'absurdity' or 'futility' seems the most appropriate translation: firstly, because it makes more sense to say that (s)he saw 'absurdity' than that (s)he saw 'ephemerality'; and secondly, because the effect of the passage is lessened if the situation is being described as something insubstantial or passing. The same applies in 6:11 where increasing words increases *הבל*, and in 8:14 where the author relates (a) *hebel* that is done on earth - transience or ephemerality seems highly inappropriate in this context. It is far from clear how *כל-שבא הבל* in 11:8 is to be understood, but *הבל* in 11:10 seems to indicate transience because the author is exhorting the reader to enjoy his/her youth while it lasts. As Fox (1989:42) says,

In 11:10 the time of youth is called *hebel*. Here alone something is called *hebel* in order to emphasize its precariousness. While youth may be absurd in various ways, that quality is not the point of this statement, for Qoh 12:1 shows that it is the brevity of youth that increases the urgency of seizing the opportunities it offers. 'Ephemeral' is therefore the word's primary meaning in this verse. The absurdity of youth (or its futility, triviality, or any other negative quality besides ephemerality) would not be a reason for enjoying it.

This comment is particularly noteworthy in view of Fox's assertions that 'Qohelet's thematic statement, "Everything is *hebel*" implies that there is some meaning common to the various occurrences of the term,' and 'for Qohelet there is a single quality that is an attribute of the world ... The *hebel* leitmotif disintegrates if the word is assigned several different meanings' (1989:35,36). However, Fox is forced to concede (1989:43) that on several occasions the occurrences of this word 'resist the understanding of *hebel* as absurdity'. It seems from our survey of the use of *הבל* that in some cases a translation such as 'absurd' or 'futile' is more appropriate, while in others it conveys the sense of ephemerality or transience; but in most cases it is not clear which sense it takes. This seems to be the case in the phrases in the second half where it is used in the third, first and second person to describe the days of one's life:

הבלו	ימי-חיי	6:12
הבלי	ימי	7:15
הבלך	ימי חיי	9:9a
הבלך	ימי	9:9b

Fox (1989:43) says of these verses,



*hebel* refers to human life in general, and it is impossible to determine just what Qohelet has in mind; 'ephemeral' or 'absurd' (or a number of other adjectives) could apply equally well.

It makes a considerable difference to the interpretation of these verses if *הבל* is understood to indicate the transient nature of human life, or if it is taken to signify that human life is in some way futile or absurd. It also significantly affects the interpretation if life is said to be meaningless, or vain, or incomprehensible, etc. Is the author commenting on the brevity of life - an easily observable fact which can hardly be disputed? Is (s)he affirming the mystery of life under the sun whereby people are unable to make sense of life as they observe it? Or is (s)he making the much more radical statement that life is 'manifestly irrational or meaningless'?

The only occurrence of *הבל* we have not mentioned is in 5:6. This is the only time the plural is used outside the inclusio, but it is a difficult verse to which we shall return later.

### 7.1.3 1:3

This verse, the final verse of the introduction, also introduces key words and phrases in Qohelet. The word which may immediately provoke attention is *יתרון* because it is unique in this book to the Hebrew Bible, as indeed is the *qitlon* form of the noun<sup>32</sup>. Ogden devotes his second appendix (1987:22-29) to this word because he takes it to be *the* key word in Qohelet:

From the outset, Qoheleth makes clear what his purpose is. He is examining human life and work with a view to ascertaining whether or not there is any 'advantage' (*yitron*) in it. The question in 1:3 is the programmatic question for the entire book. (1987:28)

However, the commentators disagree over the precise implications of the word. Crenshaw (1988:59) suggests that 'the word *yitron* (profit) is possibly a commercial term for what is left after all expenses are taken into account'<sup>33</sup>. Fox (1989:60) disagrees, stating,

*Yitron* (together with its synonyms *motar* and *yoter*) is commonly translated 'profit'. But this translation is problematic because Qohelet, who denies that *yitronot* derive from toil (see especially 1:3; 2:11; 3:9), nevertheless does find profit in that activity and others.

He maintains that '*Yitron* means "advantage" (when two things are being compared) or "adequate gain" (when used absolutely).' However, he concedes (1989:61) that 'It is not clear if

<sup>32</sup>As Schoors (1992:63) remarks,

Qoh employs abstract *qitlon* nouns with a relatively high frequency: *יתרון* (1,3; 2,11.13; 3,9; 5,8.15; 7,12; 10,10.11), *כשרון* (2,21; 4,4; 5,10), *חשבון* (7,25,27; 9,10), *חסרון* (1,15), *שלטון* (8,4.8) and *זכרון* (1,11; 2,16) ... To the list we can add *רעיון* (Qoh 1,17; 2,22; 4,16) ... the regular *qittalon* is used by Qoh, too: e.g. *זכרון* (1,11), *בטחון* (9,4) and *חשבנות* (7,29). But *qitlon*-forms are used in the Mishna.

<sup>33</sup>Similarly, Gordis (1968:205) writes, '*יתרון* is probably a commercial term, the surplus of the balance sheet'.

the notion of adequacy is lexicalized in *yitron* or peculiar to Qohelet's application.' Moreover, Fox's argument concerning the translation 'profit' only holds good if 1:3 and 3:9 are rhetorical questions, which they need not be. 2:11 may not be a general statement, because it follows a description of the deeds and work which Qohelet him- or herself had undertaken.

Ogden, as is apparent from the quote above, translates יתרון 'advantage', but he explains it further, saying (1987:25,29),

the original commercial application of *ytr* is absent from Qoheleth's use of his term *yitron*. He has assigned it a metaphorical sense to speak of that which is non-material. It might refer, in part, to an inner contentment which abides throughout an enigmatic life, but it seems also to incorporate the possibility of some experience beyond death ... *yitron* is Qoheleth's special term for *wisdom's reward both here and after death*<sup>34</sup>. [His emphasis]

If Fox is guilty of imposing an interpretation upon the word הבל which it cannot bear, Ogden seems here to be packing far too much into a small gap of indeterminacy in relation to the word יתרון. He, like Fox, appears to be reading back his own interpretation of the work as a whole into one key word - only he chooses a positive term through which to channel his optimistic reading of the book, while Fox employs a negative word to emphasise his pessimistic reading.

Whybray appreciates something of the ambiguity of יתרון when he writes (1989a:36-7),

It is derived from the root *ytr*, meaning 'to remain over' or 'be left over' ... But the concept of being left over is *susceptible of a number of different connotations*: in post-biblical Hebrew *yitron* can mean 'addition', and even 'redundancy' or 'worthlessness' (the state of being surplus to requirements). Consequently it is not a simple matter to determine exactly what Qoheleth intended by it<sup>35</sup>. [Our emphasis]

A closely related (perhaps synonymous? - see in particular 6:8, מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל and 6:11, מה-יתר לאדם) word is יתר, which is also exclusive in the Hebrew Bible to Qohelet, except for one occurrence in Esth 6:6 where it is as an adverb, and one in 1 Sam 15:15 where it occurs as a definite noun. These are rendered differently in the English translations, but the notion of excess is clearly common to both. The word is used both adverbally (2:15; 7:16; 12:9,12<sup>36</sup>) and nominally (6:8,11; 7:11) in Qohelet.

<sup>34</sup>However, Ogden does acknowledge something of the difficulty of determining the meaning of the word when he writes (1987:23),

Included in [the] eighteen usages of the root *ytr* are some which are too general to aid our definition of its parameters, such as 1:3; there is one in which the meaning is difficult to determine adequately (10:11), and there are several in which for textual or grammatical reasons, its specific reference is far from clear (5:8[9]; 7:11,12; 10:10). This leaves seven examples of *yitron* as noun to form the basis of our search for its meaning: 2:11,13; 3:9,19; 5:15[16]; 6:8,11.

<sup>35</sup>Thus Good (1978:63) translates simply, 'What is left over for man in all the toil at which he toils under the sun?'

<sup>36</sup>The last two may be conjunctions, as suggested by Fox (1989:60n.6).



A second related word, מותר, occurs once in Qohelet and only twice more in the Hebrew Bible, in Prov 14:23 and 21:5. What is important from these two verses for our purposes is that they both contrast מותר with מחסור, 'poverty' (which is used in Qohelet in a form similar to יתרון, חסרון in 1:15<sup>37</sup>), so that again the notion of excess comes across clearly.

The root יתר usually occurs in the Hebrew Bible in the form of niphil verbs meaning 'to be left over', hiphil verbs meaning 'to leave over', or as nouns meaning 'remainder' or 'excess' which occur most often in the phrase from Kgs. and Chr. noted above, ...ויתר דברי.

From all these occurrences of the root יתר and the post-biblical use of יתרון which continues in the same vein, we can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that the word here somehow relates to 'excess': 'profit', 'advantage' and 'gain' all fall within the semantic range of this root.

The question in precisely the form it appears in this verse, מה-יתרון, is found only three times in Qohelet, and on each occasion it relates to עמל:

1:3	מה-יתרון לאדם	ש- בכל-עמלו	יעמל
3:9	מה-יתרון העושה ב-	אשר הוא	עמל
5:15	מה-יתרון לו	ש-	יעמל לרוח

The translation 'profit' seems particularly appropriate in these verses, but 'gain' would also be a suitable rendering of יתרון. The question then arises why a different form of the word is used in 6:8,11 where עמל is not used:

6:8	מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל
6:11	מה-יתר לאדם

Perhaps the diminishing length of the word from יתרון to יותר to יתר represents the fading of this question at the end of the first half of the book, as new issues arise in the second half. 'Profit' is not a suitable translation here. 'Gain' is probably the best rendering in 6:11, and 6:8 might be rendered, 'what *gain* is there to the wise *more than* to the foolish?', or simply, 'what advantage has the wise over the foolish?' A similar question to that in 1:3; 3:9 and 5:15 occurs in 2:22<sup>38</sup>, but here there is no word from the root יתר:

1:3	מה-יתרון	לאדם בכל-עמלו	ש	יעמל תחת השמש
2:22	מה-היה	לאדם בכל-עמל וברעיון לבו	ש- הוא	עמל תחת השמש
3:9	מה-יתרון	העושה ב-	אשר הוא	עמל
5:15	מה-יתרון	לו	ש-	יעמל לרוח

<sup>37</sup>חסר occurs in 6:2 and 10:3.

<sup>38</sup>Schoors (1992:185) argues against Isaksson (1987:124-5), 'I am not convinced that there is any difference in meaning between 1,3 שיעמל תחת השמש and 2,22 עמל תחת השמש לבו שהוא עמל וברעיון לבו.' 'בכל עמלו וברעיון לבו שהוא עמל תחת השמש

Twice it is stated that אין יתרון 2:11 again refers to עמל, and in this context, where Qohelet is describing her/his great wealth, 'profit' would be very pertinent; and 10:11 may allude to a snake charmer's art where 'profit' would also be highly appropriate. But 2:13 states, יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות האור מן החשך, and the word cannot be translated 'profit' here because this is an inappropriate term to apply to light and darkness. 'Advantage' seems the best rendering in this verse. This is also the case in 3:19 which is the only verse in which מותר האדם מן-הבהמה אין יתרון, apparently as a synonym for יתרון, is used.

יתרון is used a further three times, in 5:8; 7:12 and 10:10. On each occasion 'advantage' seems to be an appropriate translation - but each verse is difficult and it is far from clear what they mean. 7:11 is more straightforward, and here too 'advantage' seems an appropriate rendering, but again the question arises why יתר is used instead of יתרון. If יתרון is a key word which is intended to convey a single concept, its effectiveness is lessened by the use of the synonyms יתר and מותר; if, on the other hand, an element of ambiguity is intended, the different forms of the word serve to heighten the uncertainty over precisely what the word means. It seems that the different words יתרון, יתר and מותר are used with the same meaning, and that יתרון is used with different nuances throughout the book<sup>39</sup>.

יותר is used adverbally in 2:15 and 7:16 where it means either 'exceedingly' or 'excessively'. It makes an important difference to both verses which of the two words applies. In both cases it is wisdom that is referred to, and, in fact, half of the occurrences of words from the root יתר specifically relate to wisdom (2:13,13,15; 6:8; 7:11,12,16; 10:10; 12:9). יותר in 12:9,12 probably plays on the use of words from this root earlier in the book, but this deserves separate treatment later.

עמל is another important word in Qohelet which is introduced in 1:3. Again Whybray (1989a:37) perceives the ambiguity of the word when he notes that it

has several meanings. In general in the Old Testament it has a very negative tone: trouble, misfortune, harm. In post-biblical Hebrew, however, it simply means 'work'. There is no doubt that in Ecclesiastes it often has this later meaning, which seems to have superseded the earlier ones; but in some passages it has additional overtones.

In the context of Qoh 1:3 Whybray favours the neutral term 'work' (or 'hard work'), as does Ogden - and both of these commentators present a positive reading of the book as a whole. Fox (1989:55) notes another difficulty in translating this word:

<sup>39</sup>On the ambiguity of מה-יתרון see especially Good (1978:63-4,69).



*A troublesome ambiguity* encumbers the understanding of the terms for 'toil' and 'work': sometimes they refer to the activity of toiling, sometimes to the material fruit of that activity, namely earnings or wealth ... In several occurrences of 'amal, it is nearly impossible to decide which sense is most appropriate ... And there are passages where he seems to vacillate rapidly between the two senses ... One may try to identify the most appropriate sense in any particular occurrence ... But the grounds for decision are often extremely slight. [Our emphasis]

However, he renders עַמַּל here as 'toil' which conveys a quite different impression than 'work', and Crenshaw does likewise - and these two commentators present a negative reading of the book as a whole.

עַמַּל occurs thirty-five times in Qohelet and only forty times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Of these forty, thirty-four are decidedly negative and bear the meaning 'sorrow', 'trouble', or 'suffering'<sup>40</sup>. The other six occurrences<sup>41</sup> refer to 'work' in what appears to be a neutral way (without necessarily carrying overtones of *painful* or *toilsome* work)<sup>42</sup>. This, as Whybray observes, is the sense the word seems to bear in post-biblical Hebrew where it may also have come to mean 'wealth' in the sense of 'the fruit of one's work' (as in Ps 105:44, probably the only biblical example)<sup>43</sup>. In a number of passages in Qohelet (2:10,24; 3:13; 5:17,18; 8:15; 9:9 - all of which, except the first, are verses which issue the 'call to enjoyment') the value of עַמַּל as a source of pleasure is affirmed, and in 4:9 עַמַּל brings its 'reward'. However, in other passages it is treated in decidedly more negative terms: in 2:11 it gives no 'advantage' (יִתְרוֹן); in 2:18 Qohelet says (s)he hates her/his work; in 2:19 (s)he bemoans the fact that wealth (i.e., the results of one's work) may be acquired/inherited by a wise person or a fool; in 2:20 (s)he despairs because of her/his wealth; in 2:21 (s)he complains that wealth can be lost to one who does not work for it; in 4:4 work is said to be the result of jealousy (or perhaps zealousness); in 4:6 rest is said to be better than work; in 4:8 the author states that there is no end to one's work and complains that work has deprived him/her of pleasure; in 5:14 it is noted that none of a person's wealth goes with him/her beyond the grave, which prompts the author to ask in the next verse what advantage (יִתְרוֹן) one gains from 'working for

<sup>40</sup>עַמַּל is linked with אֵין, 'trouble' or 'sorrow', in Num 23:21; Isa 10:1; 59:4; Hab 1:3; 15:35; Pss 7:15; 10:7; 55:11; 90:10; Job 4:8; 5:6. It is also linked with שׁוּא, 'emptiness' or 'vanity', in Pss 7:3 and 127:1, and כְּעַס, 'vexation', in Ps 10:14. The other negative occurrences of עַמַּל are in Gen 41:51; Deut 26:7; Judg 10:16; Isa 53:11; Jer 20:18; Hab 1:13; Pss 7:17; 25:18; 73:16; 94:20; 107:12; 140:10; Job 3:10,20; 5:7; 7:3; 11:16; 16:2; 20:22; Prov 24:2; 31:7.

<sup>41</sup>Judg 5:26; Jonah 4:10; Pss 105:44; 127:1; Prov 16:26,26.

<sup>42</sup>Ps 127:1b is particularly interesting in relation to עַמַּל in Qohelet: it reads, אִם-יְהוּדָה לֹא-יִבְנֶה בֵּית שׁוּא עֲמָלוֹ בּוֹנִי, 'but יהוה', at least by that name, does not appear in Qohelet.

<sup>43</sup>See also Rainey (1964,1965).

the wind'; in 6:7 (s)he notes that work does not bring satisfaction; in 8:17 it is observed that however hard one works it does not give insight into God's acts; and 10:15 states that a fool's work wearies him/her. In all these instances, whether the context is positive or negative, there is no indication that עֲמַל is *itself* positive or negative. Perhaps, then, it is best to view the word itself as neutral, meaning simply 'work' or 'the results of one's work'. It may be that the author is playing on the negative connotations of the word as it appears most often in the Hebrew Bible, while also employing the sense it developed in later usage - the reader being left to decide which applies in any instance. Hence the questions in 1:3 and 3:9 may also be neutral, but the addition to the similar questions in 2:22 and 5:15 of ברעיון לבו and לרוח give these verses a negative tinge:

1:3	מה-יתרון	לאדם	בכל-עמלו	ש	יעמל תחת השמש
2:22	מה-הוה	לאדם	בכל-עמל וברעיון לבו	ש-הוא	עמל תחת השמש
3:9	מה-יתרון	העושה ב-		אשר הוא	עמל
5:15	מה-יתרון	לו		ש-	יעמל לרוח

It should also be considered whether or not these questions are rhetorical, expecting the answer, 'none'. BDB (p.553) notes that מה- is 'often used in questions to which the answer *little*, or *nothing*, is expected, and it thus becomes equivalent to a *rhetorical negative*' [their emphasis]. Schoors (1992:206) argues, 'Qoh employs the rhetorical question very frequently, which reflects in a lively way the sceptical tone of his musings. It already begins in 1,3.' This is also the line Fox takes when he argues (1989:170) that 1:3

is a rhetorical question whose negative answer is implicit in the choice of the word '*amal* to designate human activities as well as in the negativism of the preceding verse. No labors are adequately compensated.

However, as Fox himself notes<sup>44</sup>, עֲמַל is not always a negative term in Qohelet, and 1:3 need not necessarily be a rhetorical question. The construction the author has used is ambiguous precisely because it *could* be a rhetorical question. The statement אין יתרון תחת השמש in 2:11 is not conclusive because it is unclear precisely what it relates to - it may refer specifically to Qohelet's own deeds and work which are described in 2:4-10.

תחת השמש is another key phrase in Qohelet, occurring twenty-nine times. Although the expression is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, there seems to be no dispute about its *translation*, 'under the sun'. However, תחת השמש is ambiguous because it can be *interpreted* in more than one way. Fox (1989:170) explains the ambiguity thus:

<sup>44</sup>Fox (1989:56) notes passage where 'Qohelet affirms the value of '*amal* as a source of pleasure.'



There are two ways in which this phrase might be used, restrictive and expansive. In the first, the purpose of the phrase would be modestly to restrict the application of Qohelet's observations *only* to the world, so as to exclude other spheres that are beyond human knowledge. 'Under the sun' then would be used to distinguish the field of observation from the non-human spheres of reality. In this case, Qohelet would be holding out the possibility of a different situation elsewhere, i.e., in the heaven or the underworld ... The meaning of the phrase is the same in the second possible use, but its function is different. In this case, Qohelet's purpose would be to emphasize the *breadth* of his observations, claiming that such-and-such is true in the *entire* world 'under the sun', not just in part of it. [His emphasis]

The different approaches are evident if we compare Fox's argument that the phrase serves the second purpose (a view shared by Crenshaw, 1988:59; and Whybray, 1989a:38), with Ogden's reading which uses the phrase in the first sense<sup>45</sup>. These two nuances of תחת השמש can make a considerable difference to the way the verse is interpreted and what meaning is assigned to it: a restrictive understanding may point 'beyond the sun' to find the answer, while an expansive understanding denies any such answer (but does not *necessarily* indicate that the work is negative, as is evidenced by Whybray's commentary). Thus the verse could be interpreted either, 'What gain has a person from all the work at which (s)he works *in this particular realm*,' or, 'What gain has a person from all his/her work *wherever* (s)he works.'

The phrase תחת השמים occurs three times (1:13; 2:3; 3:1) in Qohelet, and is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>46</sup>. It seems to have the same meaning, but raises the question why a different expression is used in these verses<sup>47</sup>. Does it bear a different nuance or is it simply used for variety? In the latter case, the reader might expect it to have been employed more often, and to be more widely spread throughout the book. The only other occurrence of the word שמים in Qohelet is in 5:1, where it is stated that האלהים בשמים ואתה על-הארץ. It also occurs 11 times in a passage about Solomon that we considered above, I Kgs ch.8, where the notion of השמים as God's dwelling place is stressed<sup>48</sup>. If the phrase תחת השמים is equivalent to תחת השמש, this might indicate, in view of 5:1, that תחת השמש designates specifically the human realm (אתה על-הארץ) as opposed to the divine realm (האלהים בשמים). תחת השמש would also then be paralleled by the expression על-הארץ as it is used in 5:1 and 8:14,16; 11:2. 8:14-17 seems to support this contention because על-הארץ is used in v.14, תחת השמש twice in v.15, על-הארץ in v.16, and תחת השמש in v.17 with no apparent difference in mean-

<sup>45</sup>Although Ogden does not state this explicitly, it is nonetheless obvious from his interpretation throughout - particularly in his view that Qohelet anticipates יתרון to be fully realized *after death*. Cf Eaton, 1983:58.

<sup>46</sup>E.g., Exod 17:14; Deut 7:24; 9:14; 2 Kgs 14:27.

<sup>47</sup>But Fox (1989:174) says, 'The interchange between the pragmatic synonyms *semes* and *samayim* may have occurred either in the transmission of texts or in the process of translation.'

<sup>48</sup>I Kgs 8:22,27,30,34,36,39,43,45,49,54. See also 2 Chr 6:18,21,23,25,26,27,30,33,35,39; 7:13,14.

ing. This use of three different expressions to convey the same thing adds to the ambiguity of the expression, leaving the reader to work out which nuance is more applicable.

It is noteworthy that with only one exception the expression **תחת השמש** is always used either with the near-synonyms **עשה** and **עמל**, or with first person use of the verb **ראה**:

תחת השמש	עמלו	ש	יעמל	בכל-	1:3
תחת השמש	ש	יעשה	ש-	נעשה הוא	1:9
תחת השמש	ובעמל	ש-	עשו ידי	ראיתי את- כל-	1:14
תחת השמש	עמלתי...	ש-	נעשו	המעשים	2:11
תחת השמש	עמלתי	ש-	נעשה	מעשי	2:17
תחת השמש	עמלי	ש-	נעשה	המעשה	2:18
תחת השמש	עמלי	ש-	נעשה	את- כל-	2:19
תחת השמש	העמל	ש-	נעשה	בכל-	2:20
תחת השמש	עמלו... שהוא עמל	ש-	נעשה	כל-	2:22
תחת השמש				בכל-	3:16
תחת השמש				ראיתי	4:1
תחת השמש				ואראה את-	4:3
תחת השמש				את-	4:7
תחת השמש				ואראה	4:15
תחת השמש				ראיתי...	5:12
תחת השמש				ראיתי	5:17
תחת השמש	עמלו	ש-	יעמל	ראיתי...	6:1
תחת השמש				לכל- מעשה	8:9
תחת השמש	בעמלו...			אשר נעשה	8:15*
תחת השמש				המעשה	8:17
תחת השמש				אשר נעשה	9:3
תחת השמש				אשר- נעשה	9:6
תחת השמש	ובעמלך אשר אתה עמל			אשר- נעשה	9:9*
תחת השמש				בכל	9:11
תחת השמש				בכל-	9:13
תחת השמש				ואראה	10:5
תחת השמש				ראיתי...	
תחת השמש				ראיתי	

(\*There are two occurrences of **תחת השמש** in each of these verses.) This means that the phrase refers particularly to the realm which the author observes, and in which work and deeds take place. It might be assumed that the work and deeds are specifically human, and this could hold true in every case apart from 8:17 where the deeds of God and the deeds that are done under the sun are linked - although precisely *how* they are linked is not clear.

The one exception to the above is found in 6:12 which refers to what happens 'afterwards', **מי-יגיד לאדם מה-יהיה אחריו תחת השמש**. 6:12 is one of the verses which assert human inability to know the future, and it probably serves as part of the introduction to the second half of Qohelet.

Two of the verses containing the phrase **תחת השמים**, and two using **על-הארץ** fit the above pattern, but, 3:1, **לכל זמן ועת לכל-חפץ תחת השמים**, is different, and there are five verses that use **על-הארץ** where there are no words from the roots **עשה**, **עמל** or **ראה**. Three of these verses are of particular importance to this discussion. The first is 5:1 which states that



God is in heaven and 'you' are on earth. The second, 11:2, is the last of the verses which assert human inability to know the future, **לא תדע מה-יהיה רעה על-הארץ**. The third, 12:7, states that dust (of which humans are composed) returns at death **על-הארץ**, while **הרוח** returns to God who gave it, thus distinguishing the realm where God is from **הארץ**. Of the other two verses where the phrase occurs one, 10:7, refers to princes walking 'upon the earth', and the other, 11:3, refers to rain falling 'upon the earth'.

## 7.2 Conclusions

It is clear from these observations that there is ambiguity associated with all the key words (**דבר**, **קהלת**, **הבל**, **יתרון**, **עמל**) and phrases (**תחת השמש**, **מה-יתרון**, **הכל הבל**) in 1:1-3. However, the ambiguity of this introduction extends beyond the individual words. The question arises whether these verses do in fact serve as an introduction to the *whole* of the book, or whether there is a change of theme or focus later in Qohelet which is not anticipated here. There are two aspects to the issue. Firstly, the key words and phrases in vv.2,3 occur more often in the first half of the book (but the reverse is true for **קהלת** and **דבר** in v.1): **הבל** is used in a ratio of 24:14; **יתרון** 7:3; **עמל** 30:5; **הכל הבל** 5:1; **מה-יתרון** 3:0; and **תחת השמש** 17:12. In addition, **יתרון**, **עמל** and **תחת השמש** are all absent from chs.11,12. Secondly, there are key words in the later chapters of Qohelet that are not intimated in these verses: **טוב** and **רע** (and associated words like **צדק** and **רשע**), **חכם** and **כסל/סכל**, and **ידע**. However, these words are introduced in 1:12-2:3, where **דבר**, **קהלת**, **הבל** and **יתרון** also appear. This may indicate that this passage serves more effectively to introduce the themes of the book as a whole. A number of commentators note that 1:12 appears to be constructed as an introduction and seems somewhat redundant in view of 1:1. Not only, then, are the key words and phrases in 1:1-3 ambiguous, but even its role as an introduction to the book is ambiguous. Ought the reader to regard 1:2-3 as the introduction the main themes of Qohelet, or is this purpose better served by statements such as **ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה על כל-אשר נעשה תחת השמים** in 1:13, and **ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות** in 1:17; and the claim which the author makes in 2:1, **אמרתי אנ בלבי לכה-נא אנסכה בשמחה וראה בטוב**, which is then picked up in 2:3 with the words, **עד אשר-אראה אי-זה טוב לבני האדם אשר נעשו תחת השמש**. This makes a considerable difference to the way the book is interpreted.

## CHAPTER 8, Chiasmus Centring on 'My Great Deeds' (1:4-2:26)

### 8.1 Commentary

#### 8.1.1 1:4-11

This section is ambiguous at the beginning, in the centre and at the end<sup>1</sup>. The ambiguity at the beginning and the end is similar: the word דֹר in v.4 might refer either to human generations or to natural eras<sup>2</sup>, while ראשנים and אחרנים in v.11 could refer either to people past and future or to things or times past and future. הדברים in v.8, at the centre of the section, ties in with this ambiguity because it could be translated 'things', referring back to the cycles in nature described in vv.4-7, or 'words', indicating the human response to what is described in the earlier verses.

Crenshaw (1988:62) makes this comment about דֹר:

The word *dor*, an appropriate choice because of its ambiguity, suggests both nature and people. The primary sense here is probably the former: the generations of natural phenomena. But the other nuance must also be present, lending immense irony to the observation that the stage on which the human drama is played outlasts the actors themselves. [Our emphasis]

Many commentators acknowledge this ambiguity but most choose the latter sense of the word. דֹר is a common word in the Hebrew Bible where both senses appear often, but it is used only in 1:4 in Qohelet so that there are no other occurrences in the book with which to compare it. However, as 1:3 is about humankind, the most obvious progression might be to view דֹר as a reference to human generations, contrasting their constant changing with the durability of the earth. This may be the reader's first impression, but as we read on we discover that vv.4-7 address the cyclical nature of the four ancient elements of the universe: earth, wind, fire (sun) and water. In view of this, דֹר ... דֹר might be understood to refer to the cycles of nature in contrast with the steadfastness of the earth on which these cycles take place. This ties in well with what may be the original meaning of the root, 'moving in a circle' (see BDB, p.189). It is also possible that no contrast is intended, that ו that should be read as 'and' rather than 'but' to express the constancy לעולם of these cycles that take place on the earth<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps the best solution is to acknowledge the ambiguity of the word and see it as a link between the human element in v.3, and again in vv.8-11, and the natural elements in vv.4-7.

<sup>1</sup>Whybray (1988:105) notes 'the ambiguity of certain words in vv.4 and 8.'

<sup>2</sup>Cf Fox (1988); Ogden (1986); Whybray (1988).

<sup>3</sup>But Ogden (1986:91) states, 'That Ecclesiastes intends a contrast in 1.4 is not in question.'



הלך and בא also contribute to this ambiguity. The reader may connect them with the cycles of nature, or read them as euphemisms for death and birth as appears to be the case in 5:14,15 and 6:4<sup>4</sup>:

5:14 כאשר יצא מבטן אמו ערום ישוב ללכת כשבא ומאומה לא-ישא בעמלו שילך בידו  
 5:15 וגם-זה רעה חולה כל-עמת שבא כן ילך ומה-יתרון לו שיעמל לרוח  
 6:4 כי-בהבל בא ובהשך ילך ובהשך שמו יכסה

In 1:4 they are used in reverse order and could convey the sense of one generation dying and another being born to take its place and thus continue the cycle of generations. In this case בא ודור might be read 'but a(nother) generation is born'.

The ambiguity is maintained by the word הארץ which usually refers to the physical earth<sup>5</sup>, but may also, by extension, indicate the people of the earth, i.e. humanity. Thus Fox (1989:171), arguing against the majority of commentators, says,

The key to understanding this verse lies in recognizing that *ha'arets* here does not mean the physical earth, but humanity as a whole - 'le monde' rather than 'la terre' (e.g. Gen. 11:1; 1 Kgs. 2:2; Ps. 33:8).

Elsewhere (1988:109) he maintains that 'There is no other way in biblical Hebrew to express the concept of humanity as a unit; בני אדם signifies people as individuals.' ארץ occurs thirteen times in Qohelet, and only eight of these (3:21; 5:1; 8:14,16; 10:7; 11:2,3; 12:7) clearly refer to the physical earth. Of the remaining five, 5:8 is a difficult verse to interpret, but the translation 'humanity' makes at least as good sense of the verse as does 'earth'; in 7:20 'humanity' would also fit the context well, especially in consideration of the prefixed ב- rather than על-; 1:4 is the verse we are considering; and 10:16,17 seem to refer to the people of the land.

Ambiguity also enshrouds the following word, לעולם. The verb עלם, meaning 'to conceal', occurs some twenty-seven times outside Qohelet in the Hebrew Bible<sup>6</sup>, and the noun תעלמה is used a further three times<sup>7</sup>. The niphal participle in 12:14 is derived from the same root, כי את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל-נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע. This may be the only instance in the book when this root is used, but it has been suggested<sup>8</sup> that העלם in 3:11 comes from the same root. Youngblood (1986) also argues that עולמו in 12:5 is from this root.

<sup>4</sup>הלך (e.g., in Ps 39:14; Job 10:21; 14:26) and בא (e.g., in Ps 71:18) do occur elsewhere as euphemisms for death and birth, but not together.

<sup>5</sup>Good (1978:64) suggests that it might also mean 'underworld'.

<sup>6</sup>Lev 4:13; 5:2,3,4,13; 20:4,4; Deut 22:1,3,4; 1 Sam 12:3; 1 Kgs 10:3; 2 Kgs 4:27; Isa 1:15; 58:7; Ezek 22:26; Nah 3:11; Ps 10:1; 26:4; 55:2; Job 6:16; 28:21; 42:3; 90:8; Prov 28:27; Lam 3:56; 2 Chr 9:2.

<sup>7</sup>Ps 44:22; Job 11:6; 28:11.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Whitley (1979:32-3) and Barton (1912:105-6), who writes, 'The context in our verse *compels* us to render it "ignorance".' [Our emphasis]

A second root, meaning something like 'puberty' or 'adolescence', occurs in the Hebrew Bible sixteen times, but is not used in Qohelet. The root which most interests us here is a third one which occurs only in the nominal form עולם, with various prefixes and suffixes, and appears well over four hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. Its meaning is well established as a long period of time either in the past or in the future. Thus it is used of ancient time<sup>9</sup>, ancient people<sup>10</sup>, ancient gates<sup>11</sup>, the long dead<sup>12</sup>, etc., and also of indefinite futurity in phrases like עבד עולם<sup>13</sup>, ענר לעולם<sup>14</sup>, עולם אשירה<sup>15</sup> and הודה לעולם<sup>16</sup>. But a problem arises in trying to assess whether the word can bear the sense of the eternal, of something beyond our conception of time<sup>17</sup>. Certainly the majority of its occurrences are in connection with some aspect of God's character or of his dealings with his people. For example, it is used of divine existence<sup>18</sup>, of many other of God's attributes<sup>19</sup>, of his covenant<sup>20</sup>, of his promises<sup>21</sup>, of the Messianic dynasty<sup>22</sup>, and of the relationship between God and his people<sup>23</sup>. However, the commentators are divided on whether or not these occurrences convey the notion of 'the eternal'. Ogden (1987:55), for example, suggests that עולם in Qohelet 'accord[s] with the general OT usage, that is as a reference to the "eternal" dimension.' On the other hand, Whybray (1989a:40) asserts that "*olam* does not mean "eternity" because this is 'a concept foreign to Old Testament thought and certainly to that of Qoheleth.' This is too big an issue to address in depth here as it involves discussion of the whole area of the ancient Israelite conception of who God is, so we must hold judgment on the use of עולם in the Hebrew Bible in general and focus on its occurrences in Qohelet in particular.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Isa 63:11; Amos 9:11; Mic 5:1; 7:14; Mal 3:4.

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Isa 44:7; Jer 5:15.

<sup>11</sup>E.g., Jer 6:16; Ps 24:7,9; Job 22:15; etc.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., Ezek 26:29; Ps 143:3; Lam 3:6.

<sup>13</sup>Deut 15:17; 1 Sam 27:12; Job 40:28.

<sup>14</sup>Exod 21:6; Lev 25:46.

<sup>15</sup>Ps 89:2; cf. Pss 52:10; 115:18; 145:1,2.

<sup>16</sup>Pss 30:13; 44:9; 52:11; 79:13.

<sup>17</sup>Cf, e.g., Barr (1962:82-104).

<sup>18</sup>E.g., Gen 21:33; Deut 32:40; Isa 40:28.

<sup>19</sup>E.g., אהבה, Jer 31:3 etc.; חסד, Isa 54:8, etc.; כבוד, Ps 104:31; אמת, Ps 117:2, etc.; צדק, Ps 119:142; עצה, Ps 33:11.

<sup>20</sup>E.g., Gen 9:16; Exod 31:16; Isa 24:5; etc.

<sup>21</sup>E.g., 2 Sam 7:13; Isa 40:8; Ps 133:3; etc.

<sup>22</sup>Isa 9:6; Pss 45:7; 110:4; etc. Of course it is a moot point whether these and other such verses refer to some kind of divinely instituted figure, or to a purely human institution.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Isa 57:16; Ps 45:18; 1 Chr 29:18; etc.



עולם occurs seven times in this book (excluding נעלם which we discussed above). In 1:4 it accords with the meaning we have already mentioned of indefinite existence in the future. This is also the sense conveyed negatively in 2:16. In 1:10 the notion is of a long period of time in the past - again as we observed above. 3:14 accords with the majority of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible in referring to activities of God enduring לעולם, whether that means for the indefinite future or for eternity. 9:6 and 12:5 are particularly noteworthy because they refer to what happens (12:5) and what does not happen (9:6) after death, although this too could presumably refer to either the indefinite future or eternity<sup>24</sup>. We must leave discussion of 3:11, and with it further discussion of עולם, for the moment and simply observe at this point that all the senses of this word which are found in the Hebrew Bible in general appear in Qohelet, and the problems we encountered above apply equally to this book.

Vv.5-7 seem quite clearly to refer to cycles in nature, describing first the sun, then the wind and finally rivers and the sea. However, it may be more than coincidence that השמש and הרוח feature in key phrases in Qohelet that usually relate to human activities, or at least to the sphere in which human activities take place. In addition, 'seeing the sun' is used three times to refer to human life (6:5 negatively, and 7:11; 11:7 positively), while הרוח in 3:19-21 and 12:7 describes the human breath/spirit which departs at death. Particular attention is drawn to the word הרוח because it is held back as late as possible and is repeated at the end of the verse<sup>25</sup>. It should be noted that both שמש in 1:5 and רוח in 1:6 take masculine verbs, while elsewhere in Qohelet (with the exception of רוח in 3:19) they take feminine verbs (שמש in 12:2; and רוח in 3:21; 10:4; 12:7)<sup>26</sup>.

Of greater importance in terms of the ambiguity of this passage, is the question whether these three verses are to be read negatively, indicating the monotony of these endless cycles in nature, or positively, as a description of the constancy or reliability of nature. Taken in isolation they could be read either way as there is no clear indication within them of how they are to be interpreted - they are in fact quite neutral. Fox (1989:168) implicitly acknowledges this

<sup>24</sup>Of particular interest in this respect is Daniel 12:2,3 which reads,

ורבים מישני ארמת-עפר יקיצו אלה לחיי עולם ואלה לחרפות לדראון עולם  
והמשכלים יזהרו כזהר כזהר הרקיע ומצדיקי הרבים ככוכבים לעולם ועד

<sup>25</sup>See Good (1978:66) who goes through the reading process, and says in relation to הרוח, 'Notice how the poet fends us off, forces us to hold our breath in suspense.'

<sup>26</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:69-70).

when he argues,

after reading 1:2 no one would take 1:4-7 as a celebration of the stability of the natural order. Instead we immediately ask: what is *hebel* about these natural processes?

However, the difficulty here is the ambiguity of the term הבל - what is it that we are looking for in these natural processes? If הבל means 'breathlike' or 'ephemeral' it would actually form a sharp contrast with the endlessly repeating cycles of nature. Does this mean, then, that some such interpretation of הבל as 'absurd' or 'futile' should be adopted instead? Not necessarily, as the author may intentionally have followed 1:2 with these verses so as to raise the question in the reader's mind, 'if the cycles of nature are so constant, what does it mean to say that "all is *hebel*"?' Besides, it is not at all clear that it makes any more sense to say that these natural cycles are absurd or futile, than it does to say that they are ephemeral.

The word שואף illustrates well the ambiguity of 1:5-7<sup>27</sup>. It occurs only here in Qohelet, and the root from which it derives is used on only seven other occasions in the Hebrew Bible. Of these seven, two<sup>28</sup> suggest panting from weariness, and five<sup>29</sup> panting with desire. Either could apply here, giving a negative or a positive reading of the verse. Crenshaw (1988:63) reads the word in the first way, 'Instead of picturing a vigorous champion who easily makes the daily round, he thinks of strenuous panting to reach the destination. Having arrived, an exhausted sun must undertake the whole ordeal again.' By contrast, Whybray (1989a:41) opts for the second, 'The positive sense is the more appropriate here: the sun pants eagerly towards its next appearance.' Perhaps it would be best to agree with Ogden (1987:31) on this point when he says,

Whether this movement is wearying or bears a sense of eagerness and longing is not a question to be settled unequivocally, as 'panting' is used in both senses in the OT (cf Ps. 56:2; Isa. 42:14). Unfortunately our text leaves us without clear guidance as to which view approximates to Qoheleth's. Only for those who, for other reasons, adopt the view that Qoheleth's basic position is a pessimistic one, is it clear that the sun grows weary of this constant round [and, presumably, the same argument holds true for an optimistic reading].

The *zaqeph* above מקומו does nothing to aid interpretation, and in fact it is the first of a number in Qohelet which seem to occur at inappropriate points in the verse. These accents often

<sup>27</sup>But BHS suggests that שואף should probably be read שוב אף. On a literary level this seems to make good sense. If it is combined with the other emendation of this verse suggested by BHS, deletion of the last three words, the verse would be nicely balanced, would retain the sense of circularity, and would follow on well from verse four. However, it has no textual support, and שואף is in keeping with the author's use of words which allow for different nuances.

<sup>28</sup>Isa 42:14; Jer 14:6.

<sup>29</sup>Jer 2:24; Ps 119:131; Job 5:5; 7:2; 36:20.



confuse rather than assist our understanding of the text and this begs the question whether they are to be ascribed to a copyist's error, as is usually argued, or constitute a ploy to heighten ambiguity. This raises the further question of who is responsible for such ambiguity - the author or a later editor?

V.8 is a key verse in terms of negative or positive readings of 1:4-7. The way this verse is understood will have a major bearing on the interpretation of the earlier verses - but it is far from clear how it is to be read. The difficulties start with the word **הַדְּבָרִים**. In light of the preceding verses, **כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים** might be read as referring to the cycles of nature and translated as 'all things'. But the recurrence of the root **דבר** a few words later with the sense of 'speak' serves to cast doubt on this initial understanding. Does **הַדְּבָרִים** relate back to the 'things' described in the earlier verses, or does it relate to the 'words' that a man is unable to speak? The commentators are divided on the issue, with Whybray (1989a:44), for example, contending that we should read 'things', while Fox (1989:171) argues for the translation 'words'. Precisely the same issue arises over the singular **דבר** in v.10, which also precedes a verb connected with speaking, **אמר**. Perhaps in both cases the word is intended to be ambiguous. In v.8 this would allow it to serve as a link between the cycles of nature described in 1:5-7 (or 1:4-7), and the human sphere which is the focus of the rest of v.8 and perhaps also vv.9-11.

The word **יָגְעִים** also raises difficulties. The root occurs twice more in Qohelet (10:15; 12:12) and another forty-five times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. However, only three times does it occur as an adjective<sup>30</sup> - if, indeed, the word is an adjective in this verse: it could also be a participle<sup>31</sup>. The root bears the meaning 'toil, grow or be weary' (BDB, p.388), and it is usually the latter sense which is understood here, the sense the root also bears in 10:15 and 12:12. Thus it might be rendered 'weary' or 'wearied', or possibly by extension (though there appears not to be a biblical precedent) 'wearisome'<sup>32</sup>. However, Ogden and Whybray both argue that the sense of toil or hard work is what is being considered here. Whybray (1989a:39) says, 'In the present context it makes good sense to take the phrase 'All things are

<sup>30</sup>Here, Deut 25:18 and 2 Sam 17:2.

<sup>31</sup>Ogden (1987:32) argues against the majority when he maintains that it is more likely here to be a participle than an adjective.

<sup>32</sup>Barton (1912:74); Eaton (1983:59) and Whybray (1988:107; 1989:39) all argue that 'weariness' is an inappropriate translation.

*yege'im* as referring to the ceaseless 'toil' or busy activity of the natural phenomena.' In this case the word here might be rendered 'hard-working' or perhaps 'busy'. There are, then, a number of possible translations of the first clause of this verse:

All things are weary  
 All things are wearisome  
 All things are busy  
 All words are weary  
 All words are wearisome

It makes a considerable difference to the sense of the verse which of these is chosen.

The next clause also causes problems. Its translation is clear enough, but what its relevance is in the context is much less clear. It seems to link in with the second half of the verse because of its similarity in structure and content:

לא-יוכל איש לדבר  
 לא-תשבע עין לראות  
 ולא-תמלא און משמע

But it is no easier to determine precisely what the last two clauses of the verse refer to, and whether they are a negative or a positive judgment. It may be that the first part of the verse is a negative conclusion to the preceding verses: because of the endless drudgery of the cycles of nature everything is weary. In this case these three phrases might link this weariness to the human sphere: people are too weary to be able to speak and they achieve no satisfaction no matter how much they see and hear. On the other hand, the first phrase may be neutral, describing the busy-ness of nature as portrayed in the earlier verses. In this case the following three phrases might be paraphrased, 'speech cannot capture it all, nor can the eye see it all, or the ear hear it all'. A third option is to see the first two clauses of the verse as more closely linked to each other: 'all words are weary so that a man cannot speak'. This might be read negatively to mean that even speech is weary or wearisome, or positively to mean that there is so much activity that speech wearies in the telling and still fails to express it all.

The matter is further complicated by the inappropriateness of each clause. The first clause is untrue: people are able to speak; moreover, the first half of v.10 relates words which have been spoken. **שבע** is an unusual verb to use in connection with the sight of the eye because it refers to one's literal appetite for food, or to other 'appetites' which people seek to satisfy: it is in this latter sense that the root is used in connection with the eye again in 4:8. It is perhaps noteworthy that **שבע** occasionally seems to bear the sense of being wearied by



something<sup>33</sup>, but nowhere else does it take -ל<sup>34</sup>. מלא is also an unusual verb to use with reference to the ear because the ear cannot actually be 'filled' with what it hears.

If the three human senses referred to in this verse balance the three natural elements described in the preceding verses, it seems probable that something similar is being asserted about the senses to what is said in vv.5-7 about the elements. Whatever the implications, these earlier verses indicate the endless repetition in nature: the sun never stops rising and setting; the wind never stops changing its direction; the rivers never stop flowing into the sea, which in turn never fills up. To take the last first, because the word מלא is used both of the sea and the ear, the implication may be that just as water constantly flows into the sea but never fills it, so sounds constantly flow into the ear but it is always ready to hear more - or it is never satisfied with what it does hear. The previous clause might then indicate that as the wind moves round and round but is always ready to blow, so the eye is always on the move but its ability to see is never exhausted - or it is never content with what it sees. The word שואף in relation to the sun in v.5 is then highly appropriate because panting is of course associated with the mouth which also produces words. Moreover, if the mouth is panting, be it from exhaustion or from eagerness, its ability to produce words would be greatly reduced - but is it excitement or drudgery it wants to express?

Alternatively, the two halves of this section may be antithetical: the sun, the wind and the rivers carry on their proper roles in perpetuity, but a man (sic) wants more. He is fed up with talking, seeing and hearing, and wants something new. However nature indicates that there is nothing new. Moreover, while people come and go, the earth stands for ever. This antithesis comes out most clearly in the contrast between the earth in v.4 and the people who are not remembered in v.11: the earth continues for ever, but generations of people come and go and those who come after bear no memory of those who went before.

This assumes, of course, that v.11 refers to people. But just as דור and הארץ in v.4 are ambiguous, so too are ראשנים and אחרנים in v.11, because they could refer either to former and later 'generations' or to former and later 'things' or 'times'. Again the commentators are divided on the issue, with Fox (1989:173), for example, arguing for 'things' (or 'events')<sup>35</sup>,

<sup>33</sup>Cf Isa 1:11; Hab 2:16; Ps 123:3,4; Job 7:4; Prov 28:19.

<sup>34</sup>It takes מן in Qoh 6:3 and in Isa 66:11; Ezek 32:4; Ps 104:13; Job 19:22; Prov 14:14.

<sup>35</sup>Cf Eaton (1983:61); Loader (1986:22).

while Crenshaw (1988:68) reads the verse as a reference to 'generations'<sup>36</sup>. The issue is often decided by reference to the fact that the usual impersonal form is the feminine plural<sup>37</sup>, which would suggest that the masculine here refers to people<sup>38</sup>. Even if Qohelet could be depended on for adherence to grammatical norms (and the singular *היה* associated with the plural *עלמים* in v.10 is just one of many grammatical anomalies in the book<sup>39</sup>), this would not be decisive. Both singular<sup>40</sup> and plural<sup>41</sup>, definite and indefinite, of *אחרון* and *ראשון* are used with reference to people and to things or periods of time. While it is true that the closest parallels, where *ראשונים*<sup>42</sup> and *אחרונים*<sup>43</sup> are used without any accompanying noun, refer to people, it would be grammatically correct to render the words either as 'those people who' or 'those things which' came before and will come after. Moreover, it is possible on the one hand that the sense of 'ages' past and present carries over from *עלמים* in the previous verse; or on the other that, in light of 1:4, an allusion is being made to the expression *דור אחרון* which occurs a number of times in Pss. with the clear meaning 'former generation'<sup>44</sup>, and the parallel expression *דור ראשון* in Job 8:8. Of course, this might serve to compound the ambiguity rather than help to resolve it.

There may also be an allusion to the use of *אחרון* and *ראשון* in 2 and 3 Isa. referring usually to former and latter *things*, but also to people and to God<sup>45</sup>. If this is the case, it adds a certain touch of irony to Qoh 1:4-11 because several times in Isa. Yahweh declares that he will do a new thing<sup>46</sup>, while Qoh 1:9-10 clearly states that there is nothing new (at least not 'under the sun'). There is also an emphasis in 2 Isa. on remembering the former things<sup>47</sup>, but 3 Isa. declares (Isa 65:16-17):

<sup>36</sup>Cf Barton (1912:76); Crenshaw (1988:68); Gordis (1968:208); Ogden (1987:33). Whybray (1989:46) reckons the issue unimportant: 'these phrases could equally well be rendered "former/later men [sic]" or "former/later ages"; the general point is unaffected.'

<sup>37</sup>Cf, e.g., Isa 42:9; 43:9,18; 46:9.

<sup>38</sup>Cf, e.g. Gen 33:2; Lev 26:45; Deut 19:14; Ps 79:8; Job 18:20(? translated as 'they of the west' in the RSV).

<sup>39</sup>Subject and verb seem not to agree in number in 1:10,16; 2:7,9; 10:1,12; and not to agree in gender in 7:7; 10:15.

<sup>40</sup>Compare, e.g., Prov 31:25 and Neh 8:18 with Ps 48:14 and Deut 29:21; and Job 8:8 and Gen 40:13 with 2 Sam 19:21 and Num 21:26.

<sup>41</sup>Compare, e.g., Isa 41:4 with 2 Chr 9:29; and Ps 79:8 with Deut 4:32.

<sup>42</sup>Lev 26:45; Deut 19:14 and Ps 79:8.

<sup>43</sup>Isa 41:4 and possibly Job 18:20.

<sup>44</sup>Pss 48:14; 78:4,6; 102:19. See also Deut 29:21.

<sup>45</sup>Isa 41:4,22,27; 42:9; 43:9,18,27; 44:6-7; 46:9; 48:3; 61:4; 65:16,17. See also 8:23. The discussion of former and latter things is an important element in the way Clements and Childs treat Isa. See, for example, Clements, RE, 'Beyond Tradition-history' in *JSOT* 31 (1985), pp.95-113, and Childs, BS, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp.311-338.

<sup>46</sup>E.g., 42:9; 43:19; 48:6.

<sup>47</sup>See especially 41:4,22-23; 43:8-9; 44:6-8,21; 46:8-11; 48:3-6. By contrast, see 43:18-19; 65:16-17.



...the former troubles are forgotten  
and hid from my eyes.  
For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;  
and the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind<sup>48</sup>.

One further possible allusion should be noted. We considered above in relation to the first word of Qohelet, דברי, the phrase which concludes the account of Solomon in 1 Kgs 11:41, ויתר דברי שלמה וכל-אשר עשה וחכמתו הלוא-הם כתבים על-ספר דברי שלמה. The equivalent (though significantly different) conclusion in 2 Chr 9:29 uses the same two words we are considering here, ושאר דברי שלמה הראשנים והאחרונים הלא-הם כתובים על-דברי נתן הנביא. הראשנים והאחרונים is one of the standard expressions used in 1 and 2 Chr. to sum up the deeds of the kings, equivalent to the יתר דברי in 1 and 2 Kgs., and sometimes in 1 and 2 Chr. טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו, 7:8a is particularly relevant in this regard.

The ambiguity of 1:4-11 operates on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the question of whether דור and הארץ in v.4, and הראשנים and האחרונים in v.11 refer to people or things/eras in nature. This means that the passage is enclosed by ambiguity. A related question concerns the translation of הדברים in v.8: does it indicate 'things' in nature or human 'words' - presumably the words referring in some way to the cycles of nature described in the first half of the passage. This means that there is also ambiguity at the centre of the passage. The ambiguity at this level is a literary device which enables a particularly close connection between the description of nature in vv.4-7 and the human realm which is the subject of vv.8-11: the two halves merge into each other at the centre, and the beginning and end of the passage use terms which have a double meaning allowing them to relate to *both* humanity and to the cycles of nature. In terms of interpretation, therefore, there is no need to choose one or other sense of these words, but rather their plurivocity should be acknowledged, and allowed to resonate throughout the passage. Translation, of course, is another matter.

The second level of ambiguity relates to the connection between the two halves of the section: what is the human response in the second half to the repetition and circularity in nature portrayed in the first half? Two diametrically opposed interpretations can be sustained, dependent largely on how v.8 is understood. Either the cycles in nature are regarded as

<sup>48</sup>Cf Ps 79:8.

dependable phenomena producing a bustle of activity which will keep any individual and endless generations occupied all their lives - even though nothing is actually new, it just fades from one individual or collective memory to be rediscovered by another (of course, new and more efficient ways of doing things are discovered or invented, but nonetheless people and nature continue basically unchanged). Or alternatively humanity is viewed as caught up in one of a series of endless, monotonous cycles from which there is no escape - and there is not even any continuing memory of people after they die. The ambiguity at this level reflects reality: the cycles of nature are observable phenomena to which people respond in their own way. On the one hand, the provisions of nature can be gratefully accepted<sup>49</sup>, and, in the best traditions of scientific research, its predictability can be utilised to best effect. On the other, one can succumb to despair at the monotony of nature which fails to provide for the inexhaustible greed of humankind which seeks gratification of desires beyond the grasp of life 'under the sun'. We might reflect that ironically such greed has created in recent years something that is genuinely and horrifically new and unprecedented - the human capacity to halt forever the cycle of human generations. But even then, the sun would continue shining, even if its rays didn't reach earth; the wind would continue to blow, even if its patterns were greatly altered; and water would continue to fall from polluted clouds and collect in rivers incapable of supporting life, which in turn would flow into seas that would not only never be full of water, but possibly would never again be full of living creatures and plants.

The third level of ambiguity concerns the relation of this passage to the rest of Qohelet: what purpose does 1:4-11 serve in the book? It is not at all clear how it relates either to the preceding verses, or to those which follow it. It might be an illustration of the statement in v.2 that **הכל הבל**, but we have already noted the difficulties involved here because of the ambiguity of the word **הבל**. If **הבל** means something like 'ephemeral', the constantly repeating cycles of nature stand in contrast to this ephemerality, but perhaps human achievements could be described in this way, particularly if nothing new is achieved nor any memory left of them. On the other hand, if **הבל** indicates absurdity or futility, it again seems an inappropriate description of the cycles of nature which are not obviously either futile, as they do serve to main-

<sup>49</sup>See, e.g., Lohfink's comment (1987:238) on v.9, 'There is nothing melancholy about this statement. It is a shout of joy: behind the ephemeral moment shines eternal permanence.'



tain the balance of nature, or absurd, as there is nothing inherently unreasonable about them<sup>50</sup>. Again it might be possible to describe human activity in this way if people fail to achieve satisfaction in their speech or from what they see and hear, and if what they do is only what has been done before and they are not remembered for it. But the link is not obvious.

1:4-11 might also relate to the question, **מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש**, posed in 1:3. Again the first half describing the cycles of nature seems to bear no connection with this question except for the first four words which could indicate that generations come and go, perhaps implying that nothing of any lasting value can be achieved. However, this seems a decidedly tenuous link. The most pertinent part of the passage is the statement in v.9 that **תחת השמש** **אין כל-חדש תחת השמש**, particularly because of the use of the key phrase **תחת השמש**. Also the repeated assertion in v.11 that no memory is retained of former people/things may bear on the question. But again the link is somewhat tenuous. Moreover, the use of **איש** in v.8 raises questions about the relation of this passage to v.3 where **האדם** is used. In fact, **איש** occurs only eight times in Qohelet (1:8, 4:4; 6:2,2,3; 7:5; 9:15,15) - compared to forty-nine occurrences of **אדם** - and most of these seem to refer to a specific man as opposed to humankind in general<sup>51</sup>. Indeed, a very similar phrase to this one appears in 8:17, but there **האדם** is used, **לא יוכל האדם**, and there is no apparent reason why **איש** is used here instead - except perhaps to maintain the balance between the first half of v.8 and v.4:

v.4 דור הלך ודור בא והארץ לעולם עמדת  
v.8a כל-הדברים יגעים לא-יוכל איש לדבר

It should also be noted that **האדם** reappears in 1:13, near the beginning of the next section.

The link between 1:4-11 and the following verses is just as uncertain. 1:13 picks up from v.9 the theme of 'what is done' which forms the inclusio to the section from 1:12-2:3, but here the phrase **תחת השמים** occurs instead of **תחת השמש**. Another possible link may be the allusion to Solomon in 1:12. This would be particularly ironic in light of v.11 which not only states that future generations forget those who went before, but expresses these sentiments using the very words used to sum up Solomon's deeds in 2 Chr 9:29.

<sup>50</sup>Whybray (1988:105) argues, 'These examples are not intended to show the futility of these phenomena, but only their regularity ... Not a word is said about their futility: on the contrary, the reader is implicitly invited to regard their activity with wonder and admiration.'

<sup>51</sup>See 6:2,2,3; 9:15,15. 4:4 and 7:5 are more like the usage here, although the proverbial form of 7:5 may explain its use there. The plural **אנשים** is used twice, both times to refer to specific men.

But again it is difficult to see how the passages bear on each other: how does 1:1-3 affect 1:4-11, and how does it in turn affect 1:12-2:3? These three sections seem rather to be juxtaposed with no obvious attempt to establish a connection between them.

However, 1:4-11 does establish a pattern that is followed throughout the book, more or less explicitly. The first half pictures the way things are on earth, while the second half explores the implications for human life - in an ambiguous fashion so that the reader is forced to draw his or her own conclusions. We have already noted the importance in Qohelet of the author's observations of what happens under the sun, we shall go on to see how the implications of what (s)he sees are generally indeterminate so that the reader is constantly left to fill in the gaps.

### 8.1.2 1:12-2:3

We have already observed that this section seems to serve as a second, and more comprehensive introduction to the book, which outlines some of the major themes that are explored later on and which did not feature in 1:1-3.

There are a number of minor points of ambiguity or anomaly in the passage which should be noted. Firstly, the verb *הייתי* in v.12 may, as Barton (1912:85) suggests, be 'a perfect denoting state,'<sup>52</sup> but the most obvious reading is to see it as a verb indicating completed action, 'I was king,' or 'I *have been* king.' If it were intended clearly to indicate the present tense either the participial form of *היה* (or of the verb *מלך*) could have been used, or more probably the verb omitted altogether as in the closest parallel uttered by David in 2 Sam 19:23, *אני-מלך על-ישראל*. The implication of the perfect form of the verb is that the writer is not at the time of writing king over Israel. Perhaps the ambiguity of the verb is a hint that the writer is not in fact King Solomon, but only adopts this guise for the purposes of chs.1,2. Alternatively, it may indicate that the writer is not, nor makes any pretense at being, a king, but is rather an adviser over Israel<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>52</sup>Isaksson (1987:50) argues,

The stative aspect of *hayiti* in 1:12 obviously must not be construed as an actual (cursive) present. It involves at the same time a perfect and a present: 'I have been, and still am.'

<sup>53</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:172-3).



The preposition is also unusual, מלך על-ישראל. The usual phrase is just מלך ישראל<sup>54</sup>, but the construction with על occurs a few times elsewhere<sup>55</sup>. One of these, 1 Kgs 4:1, refers to Solomon, but describes him as king over *all* Israel: ויהי המלך שלמה מלך על-כל-ישראל. It is perhaps noteworthy that the two times the root מלך meaning 'to advise' occurs in the Hebrew Bible, once in Hebrew in Neh 5:7 and once in Aramaic in Dan 4:24, it is followed by the preposition על-.

The preposition also occurs unexpectedly in v.13 where it follows דרש and תור, both of which usually occur without a preposition<sup>56</sup>. על- appears again twice in v.16. The first of these may indicate Qohelet's superiority *over* his predecessors, but the second is also rather unexpected and the variation found in many manuscripts, בירושלם, seems more appropriate - particularly in light of the fact that this is the form that occurs on every other occasion in Qohelet:

בירושלם	דברי קהלת בן-דוד	מלך	1:1
בירושלם	אני קהלת	הייתי מלך על-ישראל	1:12
לפני על-ירושלם	... כל-אשר-היה		1:16
לפני בירושלם	מכל-ש-היו		2:7
לפני בירושלם	מכל-ש-היה		2:9

However, the *difference* between these verses is characteristic of Qohelet. We see here again that 1:1 and 1:12 which express similar sentiments are nonetheless different, as are 1:16; 2:7,9.

ענה, in v.13, is a good example of a word used in Qohelet which has several possible meanings: BDB (p.772-7) lists four different roots, 'answer, respond'; 'be occupied, busied'; 'be bowed down, afflicted'; and 'sing'<sup>57</sup>. According to BDB, the second of these roots occurs only in Qohelet, and certainly the word ענין, which is used eight times in the book (1:13; 2:23,26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:2,13; 8:16), does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. ענין is a common word in Aramaic and NH where it bears the meaning 'occupation, task', and this sense seems to fit well in most of the contexts where it is used in Qohelet. But the author may well have expected his or her readers to pick up on the more common biblical sense of ענה as

<sup>54</sup>Cf, e.g., 1 Sam 26:20; 1 Kgs 15:9; Hos 1:1; 10:15; Amos 1:1; 7:10.

<sup>55</sup>2 Sam 19:23; 1 Kgs 4:1; 11:37.

<sup>56</sup>דרש occurs only here in Qohelet. תור is followed in 2:3 by the preposition ב- and is used without a preposition in 7:25.

<sup>57</sup>Mandelkern (p.899-903) combines the first and fourth, and the second and third of these, and postulates two distinct roots. Even-Shoshan (p.900-3) finds three roots.

'be bowed down, afflicted' which would add a particular nuance to the word. In most instances the word 'affliction' would fit at least as well as 'occupation', and indeed in the case of 5:2 this nuance makes sense of a verse that would otherwise be very difficult to understand: **כי בא החלום ברב ענין וקול כסיל ברב דברים**. However, the word itself is probably neutral, taking its positive or negative connotations from its context. In three verses in Qohelet (1:13; 4:8; 5:13) it is used with **רע**, which certainly adds a negative tinge, and on a further three occasions (2:23,26; 5:2) it appears in a negative context. However, in 3:10 and 8:16 it seems to be used in a quite neutral way.

The further uses of words from a root **ענה** in 1:13 and 3:10, and also in 5:19 and possibly 6:8, are highly ambiguous because it is not at all clear which roots they derive from. It makes a considerable difference in 1:13 and 3:10 (where **רע** is not used) how **לענות** is understood:

1:13	הוא	ענין רע	נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו
3:10	ראיתי את-	הענין אשר	נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו

In both cases it may be either that God has given an occupation to be *busy* with, or *afflicted* with. The commentators are divided on which is more appropriate<sup>58</sup>, but in light of Qohelet's use of ambiguous language elsewhere, perhaps here again both possibilities should be acknowledged and the ambiguity allowed full reign. Such ambiguity ties in well with the different possible readings of 1:4-11. We will consider 5:19 later, but there may be immense irony in the use of a word from a root **ענה**, **כי לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו**.

Another key phrase is introduced in v.14, **רעות רוח**. Both words contain an element of ambiguity. According to BDB (p.944-6), there are three roots **רעה**: 'pasture, tend or graze'; 'associate with'; and 'desire, take pleasure in'. Four words used in Qohelet come from these roots: **רעות** (1:14; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6; 6:9); **רעיון** (1:17; 2:22; 4:16); **מרעהו** (4:4); and **רעה** (12:11). The last of these clearly means 'shepherd': it is a common word in the Hebrew Bible which always bears that meaning elsewhere, and 'shepherd' makes good sense in 12:11. **מרעהו** probably derives from the second root, 'to associate with', as something like 'companion' or 'associate' seems to best fit that context, and the word is occasionally used

<sup>58</sup>Gordis (1968:210), for example, argues, 'it is better to interpret the verb here and in 3:10 as "be afflicted with" and to see in the clause a striking paranomasia'. Whitley (1979:12), however, contends that 'It is likely that the meaning of the root underlying **לענות בו** here in our text is that of 2, "be occupied with."'



elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible with that meaning<sup>59</sup>. The first two words are usually taken to mean the same thing, though the question why different words should be used in the same phrase arises as soon as 1:17. It is usually argued that these words come from the third root above and have the sense of 'striving'<sup>60</sup>. This would mean that the author of Qohelet uses words from all three roots. Only once does רעות or רעיון occur apart from רוח, and this is in 2:22 where 'striving' fits well, כי מה-הוה לאדם בכל-עמלו וברעיון לבו שהוא עמל תחת השמש. But when רעיון and רעות appear with רוח, 'shepherding' would also be an appropriate translation<sup>61</sup>, particularly in light of the similar phrase, רעה רוח in Hos 12:2. It might be that the reference to 'one shepherd' in 12:11 picks up on this key phrase from the first half of Qohelet, particularly as הרוח returns 'to God who gave it' in 12:7. It seems unlikely that either word comes from the second root, 'associate with', which would make little sense in the context, but it should be noted that while רעיון occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, a word רעות meaning 'fellow (-woman)' does appear elsewhere<sup>62</sup>. However, both words could derive from a different root altogether, רעע meaning 'break'. Syr, Vulg and Targ seem to be based on this root, and it is also this root that lies behind the AV translation 'a vexation of spirit'.

רוח has a number of closely-related meanings. These include 'breath', 'wind' and 'spirit'. 'Spirit' covers a number of different concepts in much the same way as the word in English: it may refer to the living being of humans or animals<sup>63</sup>, or to human temperaments<sup>64</sup>, or to a divinely given prophetic 'spirit'<sup>65</sup>, or to God's spirit<sup>66</sup>. If רעות/רעיון means 'striving', it would be possible to translate the phrase 'a striving of spirit'<sup>67</sup> rather than 'a striving for wind'. As Fox (1989:49) points out, such a phrase would be neutral - a point he uses to argue against it. However, 'wind' fits better the contexts in which the phrase appears whether רעות/רעיון is read as 'striving' or 'shepherding'. But if רעות and רעיון come from the root רעע, 'spirit' is more appropriate: 'a breaking of spirit', or perhaps with AV 'a vexation of spirit'. On every occasion but one (1:17) רעות/רעיון רוח occurs with הבל. This might suggest

<sup>59</sup>E.g., Gen 26:26; 2 Sam 3:8; Prov 19:4.

<sup>60</sup>Cf, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:73); Eaton (1983:63).

<sup>61</sup>Cf, e.g., Ogden (1987:35).

<sup>62</sup>Exod 11:2; Isa 34:15; Jer 9:19; Zech 11:9; Esth 1:19.

<sup>63</sup>Cf Isa 42:5; Zech 13:2; Job 27:3.

<sup>64</sup>Cf Josh 5:1; Judg 9:23; 1 Kgs 10:5.

<sup>65</sup>Cf Num 27:18; 2 Kgs 2:15.

<sup>66</sup>Cf Num 11:17; 1 Kgs 22:24; Mic 3:8.

<sup>67</sup>Staples (1943:96) argues for a translation along these lines.

that the ephemerality of הבל is picked up in the phrase so that together they mean something like 'all/this is ephemeral, a shepherding of/striving for wind'. However, it might also illustrate futility: 'all/this is futile like striving for/shepherding of wind'. In either case it makes little differences how רעות/רעיון is rendered. In most instances the phrase occurs in verses where עשה or עמל is the focus, so that it may be the deeds people perform, or the work they do that is described in this way (1:14; 2:11,17; 4:4,6. In 2:26 it comes at the end of a discussion of work, although neither עשה nor עמל occur in the verse). גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח in 2:26; 4:16; 6:9 may mark the end of major sections of the book (though not every occurrence of this phrase is used in this way, nor does it occur at the end of every section, even in the first half of the book), and reflect as much on what has gone before as on the immediate context of the verse itself. 1:17 is different: it neither relates to deeds or work, nor does it occur at the end of a section. In this verse it is the search to know wisdom and folly that is described as רעיון רוח.

V.15 presents no great difficulty in terms of its translation<sup>68</sup>, although the ambiguity of 'crooked' should be noted - in Hebrew as in English it can refer either to physical or moral crookedness. But the proverb bears no obvious relation to its context so that its implications are left for the reader to work out. Does it suggest that there are in the world certain anomalies and lacks (which are part of what God has given)? Or does it indicate that some people are crooked while others are lacking (in sense, perhaps) and nothing can be done about it? Or does it refer to the deeds people do, some of which are crooked and others lacking in some way? While all of these relate loosely to the context, none of them ties in particularly well.

The first anomaly in v.16 is the use of עם with לבי in the phrase with which the verse opens, דברתי אני עם-לבי. It makes sense if it is rendered, 'I said with my mind' probably implying 'I said to myself', but on every other occasion that a similar expression occurs it uses the preposition ב-:

<sup>68</sup>BHS indicates a variant for לתקן (the root תקן occurring only in Qoh 1:15; 7:13 and 12:9 in the Hebrew Bible) and להמנות (though the variant here has no textual support), but the sense of the proverb is little affected.



דברתי אני	עם-לבי	1:16
אמרתי אני	ב-לבי	2:1
ואמרתי אני	ב-לבי	2:15a
ודברתי	ב-לבי	2:15b
אמרתי אני	ב-לבי	3:17
אמרתי אני	ב-לבי	3:18

There is no apparent reason for the difference here, except that every time לב is used in 1:12-2:3 it is in some way different. Five out of the six sub-sections in this passage start with a verb followed by לבי:

ונתתי	את-לבי	(i)
ראיתי		(ii)
דברתי	אני עם-לבי	(iii)
ואתנה	לבי	(iv)
אמרתי	אני בלבי	(v)
תרתי	בלבי	(vi)

In (i) לבי is preceded by the object marker; it is absent altogether from (ii); it is preceded by אני and עם- in (iii); it appears alone in (iv); in (v) it is preceded by אני and ב-; and in (vi) it is preceded by ב- alone. We might also note that every time 'I said' occurs it is different:

דברתי אני עם-לבי	1:16
אמרתי אני ב-לבי	2:1
אמרתי	2:2

The second thing to note about v.16 is the two occurrences of the first person pronoun, neither of which is necessary and the second of which is decidedly awkward<sup>69</sup>. The effect is a very heavy emphasis on the first person, achieved also by the use of three first person verbs two of which<sup>70</sup> stress greatness, the use of לבי twice, three first person pronominal suffixes, and the preposition על- used twice perhaps to indicate greatness *over* others. This may allude to 1 Kgs 10:23 where Solomon's greatness is proclaimed using the verb גדל, and his superlative wisdom is noted, ויגדל המלך שלמה מכל מלכי הארץ לעשר ולחכמה.

The singular verb היה is not what one might expect, and, indeed, the versions have a plural verb. Either כל-אשר-היה לפני refers to wisdom - in which case the phrase על-ירושלם

<sup>69</sup>As Schoors (1992:160) states,

The use of the first person singular of the verb with the personal pronoun אני is characteristic of Qoh (*qatalti 'ani*: 1,16; 2,11.12.13.14.15.18.20.24; 3,17.18; 4,1.4.7; 5,17; 7,25; 8,15; 9,16) ... In classical Hebrew the personal pronoun is put before the conjugated verb only to emphasize the subject ... On the contrary, Qoh's usage of adding the pronoun *after* the verb is rather unique (cf. Cant 5,5.6) and it has no emphatic meaning ... It rather appears to be a peculiarity of Qoh's style.

<sup>70</sup>According to Gesenius (120d), two such verbs as הגדלתי and הוספתי in similar form and in direct succession are often co-ordinates with the principal idea introduced by the second verb, the first verb defining the manner of the action of the second. If this applies to our verse, the verbs would read 'I greatly increased' rather than 'I became great and increased...'. This makes better sense of the verse and takes account of the fact that both verbs are hiphil, i.e. I *caused* wisdom to greatly increase. Such a translation also takes account of the singular היה.

makes little sense, or כל-אשר-היה לפני refers to 'all *who* were before me', making sense of על-ירושלם but rendering היה grammatically incorrect. 2:9 provides an example of the latter where חכמה cannot be the subject of אשר היה (שהיה, in this case):

הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה	על כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם	1:16
וגדלתי והוספתי	מ- כל ש- היה לפני ב- יורשלם אף חכמתי עמדה לי	2:9

The irony here is that על- has been replaced in both instances, and the prepositions that take its place would, in 1:16, have been more appropriate for the translation 'I greatly increased wisdom more than all [the wisdom] that was before me in Jerusalem.' By contrast, the grammatical form of the verb היה in the near identical phrase in 2:7 is correct, but the verbs גדל and יסף and reference to wisdom are absent:

הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה	על כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם	1:16
	מ- כל ש- היו לפני ב- יורשלם	2:7
וגדלתי והוספתי	מ- כל ש- היה לפני ב- יורשלם אף חכמתי עמדה לי	2:9

This means that again an almost identical expression occurs a number of times but slightly differently on each occasion, leaving the reader to work out what difference, if any, there is in the meaning of the expressions.

וואתנה לבי, with which v.17 opens, is notable as one of only three occurrences of the *waw* consecutive in Qohelet (1:17; 4:1,7). There is no apparent reason for its use here<sup>71</sup>, nor for the absence of the object marker which is used on every other occasion that לבי is the object of a verb (1:13; 2:10,20; 8:9,16; 9:1), except that it makes the opening of this verse different to v.13, ונתתי את-לבי. It also means that the three occurrences of the verb נתן in this section, the third being נתן in v.13, are all different. In fact, with the exception the two occurrences of יוכל and יוסיף in the two proverbs in 1:15,18, no verb is used twice in the same form in this passage. The repeated verbs are as follows:

<sup>71</sup>Fredericks (1988:358) suggests that 'Qoh avoids the consecutive imperfect with *waw* possibly because its use would only have led to temporal and logical ambiguity.'



הייתי	1:12	היה
היה	1:16	
ונתתי	1:13	נתן
נתן	1:13	
ואתנה	1:17	
ולתור	1:13	תור
תרתי	2:3	
נעשה	1:13	עשה
שנעשו	1:14	
עשה	2:2	
יעשו	2:3	
ראיתי	1:14	ראה
ראה	1:16	
וראה	2:1	
אראה	2:3	
דברתי אני	1:16	דבר/אמר
לאמר	1:16	
אמרתי אני	2:1	
אמרתי	2:2	
לדעת	1:17	ידע
ודעת (?)	1:17	
ידעתי	1:17	

In v.17 this leads to ambiguity over the word ודעת: is it a noun or an infinitive verb?<sup>72</sup> In fact, both לדעת and ודעת could be nouns, both could be verbs, or there could be one of each:

I gave my mind to knowledge of wisdom and knowledge of madness and folly  
I gave my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly  
I gave my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness<sup>73</sup> and folly

The last might be ruled out on the grounds that it reads against the *zaqeph* above חכמה (although this seems to be no sure guide in Qohelet<sup>74</sup>), but also because knowing knowledge is a tautology<sup>75</sup>. The meaning of the first two is the same, so that in this instance the ambiguity makes no real difference - except, perhaps, to unsettle the reader. On a number of occasions in Qohelet ambiguity prevents the reader from being certain about the *precise* sense of a word or phrase, while the overall sense is clear.

שכלות and הוללות are an enigmatic pair of words, and neither word occurs in the Hebrew Bible other than in Qohelet. The first anomaly is that הוללות seems to be a plural

<sup>72</sup>On this issue, see especially Gordis (1937).  
<sup>73</sup>LXX and Peshitta render the word 'proverbs'.  
<sup>74</sup>The *zaqeph* above ידעתי in this verse seems odd, but the *zaqeph* is often used in Qohelet directly before אשר or ש.  
<sup>75</sup>But see Gordis (1937:327) and חושך אמריו יודע דעת in Prov 17:27.

form<sup>76</sup> (as also in 2:12; 7:25 and 9:3, but not in 10:13), while שכלות is an abstract singular, with the -ות ending which Qohelet uses relatively frequently<sup>77</sup>. שכלות is usually reckoned to be the same word as סכלות which appears six times in the book (2:3,12,13; 7:25; 10:1,13)<sup>78</sup>. It would then be from the root סכל, meaning 'be foolish or a fool', which occurs twelve times in Qohelet, but only ten times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>79</sup>. However, there is a root שכל, meaning 'be prudent', which is much more common and lies behind the text in LXX, Pesh and Targ. Whybray (1989a:51) expresses the consensus of opinion when he says,

There is evidently a confusion here between two roots of almost opposite meaning: שכל denotes prudence or intelligence, while סכל denotes folly. The pronunciation is virtually the same. Whatever the reason for the unusual spelling here, *'folly' is obviously correct here*. [Our emphasis]

However, this may well be a further example of uncertainty being deliberately introduced into the text: the uncertainty of a word which could be read in two diametrically opposed ways seems characteristic of the ambiguity of Qohelet. It also means that on the four occasions the two words appear together they are used in different ways:

ושכלות	הוללות	1:17
וסכלות	והוללות	2:12
(pl.) הוללות	והסכלות	7:25
(sing.) הוללות	סכלות ...	10:13

The question concerning the proverb in 1:15 arises again in v.18: in v.15 the crookedness and the lack may be part of the situation that God has given (see 1:13 and 7:13), or they may refer to people or to human activities; יוסף in v.18 may be rendered 'that which increases' or '(s)he who increases'<sup>80</sup>, and in the latter case '(s)he' could indicate the person whose knowledge (and, by implication, wisdom) increases (as in 1:16; 2:15, למח חכמתי אני אז יותר), or God who gives wisdom and knowledge (as in 2:26, לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן חכמה ודעת).

In 2:1 the *plene* spelling of the suffixes in the clause לכה-נא אנסכה בשמחה should be noted because it occurs nowhere else in the book. Indeed, this is the only use of the second

<sup>76</sup>But see Ges<sup>K</sup> (861); Schoors (1992:66-7).

<sup>77</sup>שפלות (10:13); הוללות (10:13); ש/סכלות (1:17; 2:3,12,13; 7:25; 10:1,13); רעות (1:14; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6; 6:9); שחרות (11:10); ילדות (11:9,10). Schoors (1992:65) says of these,

The biblical attestation of all of these words are restricted to Qoh, except for ילדות, which is found in Ps 110,3, where the reading is uncertain.

<sup>78</sup>Isa 44:25 may provide a precedent:

מפר אתות ברים וקסמים יהולל  
משיב חכמים אחור ודעתם ישכל

This verse is notable for its use of שכל, חכם and הלל.

<sup>79</sup>Gen 31:28; 1 Sam 13:13; 26:21; 2 Sam 15:31; 24:10; Isa 44:25; Jer 4:22; 5:21; 1 Chr 21:8; 2 Chr 16:9.

<sup>80</sup>It is probably a hiphil imperfect. Cf, e.g., Barton (1912:88) and Whitley (1979:17). Note, however, that the LXX renders the first as a participle and the second as an imperfect, while the Peshitta renders both by the aphel participle and the Vulgate uses present indicative for both.



person (aside from imperatives) up to 4:17, and even then the words are, in effect, addressed to the author him- or herself. Why are these forms used here? Is it for emphasis, or is it to distinguish them from genuine second person address later in the book - or is it to raise questions in the reader's mind? One consequence is ambiguity over which root **אנסכה** derives from. It is usually taken, along with most of the versions, to be the *piel* first person imperfect of the verb **נסה**, 'test, try', with the *plene* second person pronominal suffix. But it could also be the *piel* cohortative from the more common verb **נסך**, 'pour out'<sup>81</sup>, a reading underlying the Vulg. rendering of this verse. There may be some relevance in the fact that this latter verb is most commonly used in the context of libations made to gods or idols (remembering that **הבלים** elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible always refers to idols), implying that Qohelet went to all lengths in his examination of pleasure. However, this reading has the difficulty that no object is supplied for the verb. Moreover, a similar, but contrasting expression occurs in 7:23:

אמרתי אני בלבי לכה-נא	2:1
אנסכה בשמחה	
כל-זה נסיתי בחכמה אמרתי אחכמה	7:23

This is the only other occurrence of the root **נסה** in Qohelet.

The next phrase might be rendered 'see good' or 'look into good'. What exactly it conveys in the context is difficult to determine. Many commentators (and RSV, NEB and REB) translate it as something like 'enjoy yourself'<sup>82</sup>, but, as Ogden (1987:39) points out, 'we must admit that this is a rather loose translation.' 9:9 provides some support for this rendering, however, as **ראה חיים** there may mean 'enjoy life'. Moreover, **ראה** can bear the sense of 'experience', and **ראה טוב בעמלו** in 2:24; 3:13 and 5:17 may well mean 'experience pleasure in his work' which would further support such a translation, as might **וטובה לא ראה** in 6:6, **ואלו חיה אלף מנים פעמים וטובה לא ראה הלא אל-מקום אחד הכל הולך** 7:14 provides the best parallel to **ראה בטוב**, because there also we find **בטוב** (the only other occurrence in Qohelet) preceded by an imperative verb where the sense may well be 'be joyful': **ביום טובה היה בטוב**. The verb **יטב** in 7:3 may also mean 'be joyful', **טוב כעס משחק כי-ברע פנים יטב לב**, and similarly **יטיבך** in 11:9, **ויטיך לבך בימי בחורותך**, both these notably referring as here to the 'heart' being joyful. 9:7 also offers a parallel, noteworthy because it too commences with the

<sup>81</sup>Although the verb **נסך** is more common, **נסה** is found only in the *piel*, while **נסך** occurs only once in the *piel* in 1 Chr 11:18.

<sup>82</sup>See, e.g., Gordis (1968:148) and Fox (1989:177) - although the latter offers the literal translation (1989:179), 'And see [imperative] good!'.

imperative 'go!' (but without the final *he*), uses בשמחה, and refers to the heart as being joyful: לך אכל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב-טוב יינך. However, when ראה is followed by ב - which it is not in 2:24; 3:13 or 5:17 where ב follows טוב rather than preceding it, or in 9:9 - it usually means 'see in', 'look at' or 'look into'<sup>83</sup>. The other five times ב-ראה appears in Qohelet (3:22; 5:7; 7:15; 11:4; 12:3) accord with this usage.

טוב and the feminine טובה sometimes indicate wealth or prosperity, as they probably do in 4:8; 5:10; 6:3, and this offers another possibility for translation, 'look into wealth!'. Such a translation would also make good sense in 2:24; 3:13 and 5:17:

אין-טוב באדם שיאכל ושתה והראה את-נפשו טוב בעמלו 2:24  
There is nothing good in the person who eats and drinks and sees prosperity in his/her work

וגם כל-האדם שיאכל ושתה וראה טוב בכל-עמלו 3:13  
and also everyone might eat and drink and see prosperity in his/her work

הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב אשר-יפה לאכול ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל-עמלו 5:17  
Behold what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and see prosperity in all one's work

This gives a decidedly more materialistic slant to these verses. But whether or not this reading is followed, there seems to be something of a contrast between the way ראה טוב is used here and in 2:3, עד אשר-אראה אי-זה טוב לבני האדם אשר יעשו תחת השמים.

The phrase למשוך ביין את-בשרי is difficult: Fox (1989:179) says it 'has no parallel and is an interpretative crux'<sup>84</sup>. The root משך is not a particularly common one, occurring thirty-seven times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Its usual meaning is 'to draw' or 'to drag', but neither of these makes much sense here. RSV, NIV and REB render the word here as 'cheer', but although this fits the context well, there is no good biblical or post-biblical evidence for the translation. The same applies to the similar translation 'stimulate' which NEB and a number of commentators adopt<sup>85</sup>. Among other commentators 'sustain' finds more favour<sup>86</sup> because it has biblical parallels in Jer 31:2 and Ps 36:11. However, it makes little sense in this verse. Perhaps Fox's translation 'ply' (1989:179) is the best attempt to apply the normal sense of the word to the context, but it should be acknowledged that the precise sense of the verb alludes us. Of course, there is no way to know for certain if this is because the author deliberately chose a difficult word, or if the sense that it was used with has now been lost.

<sup>83</sup>See, e.g., Gen 21:16; 34:1; 44:34.

<sup>84</sup>Corré (1954:417) emends ביין to כיון, reads בשרי as a euphemism, and sees here 'a reference to epispasm in Koheleth.'

<sup>85</sup>E.g., Barton (1968:79); cf Eaton (1983:65).

<sup>86</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:77); Whitley (1979:19).



ולבי נהג בחכמה intrudes in 2:3 and should perhaps be read as a parenthesis<sup>87</sup>. Nonetheless it serves to bring together the two incongruous statements that the author was guided by wisdom but grasped at folly.

Following our comments about verbs never occurring twice in the same form in this passage, we might also point out that similar sentiments are never expressed twice in an identical way. Thus, the phrase על-ישראל בירושלם in 1:12 is reduced to על-ירושלם in v.16. The opening words of 1:13, ונתתי את-לבי, are replaced by ואתנה לבי in v.17. The search in 1:13 is expressed תרתי בלבי לדרוש ולתור, but in 2:3 this is reduced to simply תרתי בלבי. To emphasise the role of wisdom, 1:13 adds just the word בחכמה, but in 2:3 this is expanded to ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה, and 1:17 states these sentiments thus, ולבי נהג בחכמה. Reference to the deeds that are done under heaven/under the sun takes three different forms:

1:13	כל-	אשר	נעשה תחת השמים
1:14	כל-מעשים	ש-	נעשו תחת השמש
2:3		אשר	יעשו תחת השמים

ראיתי in 1:14 is replaced by ולבי ראה in v.16, which in turn is replaced by אראה in 2:3. The phrase הכול הבל appears in 1:14, but גם-הוא הבל is used in 2:1, and ורעות רוח in 1:14 becomes שגם-זה הוא רעיון רוח in v.17. In 1:16 דברתי occurs, but אמרתי אני is used in 2:1, and אמרתי in 2:2. הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה in the first half of 1:16 may express similar sentiments to ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה in the second half. In 1:17 the phrase ושללות ושכלות occurs, but in 2:3 we find ולאחז בסכלות. And לכה-נא אנסכה בשמחה in 2:1 may express the same sentiments as the expression which follows it, וראה בטוב. In addition each occurrence of לבי is in some way different:

1:13	את-לבי	(+ perfect verb)
1:16	אני עם-לבי	(+ perfect verb)
1:16	ולבי	(+ perfect verb)
1:17	לבי	(+ imperfect verb)
2:1	אני בלבי	(+ perfect verb)
2:3	בלבי	(+ perfect verb)
2:3	ולבי	(+ participle)

And there is also an alternation between אשר and ש-:

<sup>87</sup>As many commentators suggest, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:78); Fox (1989:180); Gordis (1968:216). Cf Schoors (1992:207).

1:13	אשר
1:14	-ש
1:16	אשר
1:17	-ש
2:3	אשר (x2)

When it is recalled that most of the verses in this section also have close, but different, counterparts later in the book, it is clear that not only are the themes introduced here important, but so also are the small differences between similar words, phrases and verses. Perhaps this symbolises the breadth of the author's examination of life - (s)he not only explores various different aspects of life, but also inspects a number of variations of these. It also draws attention to the few words that are repeated in identical form, most notably אני (1:12,16,16; 2:1), חכמה (1:16,16,17,18) and בחכמה (1:13; 2:3).

1:12-2:3 serves effectively as an introduction to Qohelet. Not only are a number of key themes introduced in this passage, but the reader also encounters a number of characteristic features of the book which contribute to its ambiguity: words which may be interpreted in quite different ways, including those which could derive from one of a number of different roots; words and phrases which occur several times in slightly forms; grammatical anomalies; unusual use of prepositions; verses whose connection with what precedes and follows is unclear; pauses which seem to hinder rather than assist interpretation; words which appear to be misspelt; clauses which seem to intrude; and use of both אשר and -ש.

Again, the ambiguity of the passage operates on different levels. Firstly, there are a number of words and phrases whose precise meaning is unclear. In this case the overall sense of the passage is little affected. Secondly, the author already displays an ambivalent attitude towards both wisdom (and knowledge) and pleasure. This is very important in light of the major role they play later in the book, and gives the reader no indication what attitude is being adopted toward them. Thirdly, while this passage leads well into 2:4-10, and functions effectively to introduce themes developed later in the book, it is not at all clear how it relates to 1:1-3,4-11.

### 8.1.3 2:4-10

The overall sense of 2:4-10 is quite clear - it is a catalogue of the great works undertaken by Qohelet. It uses highly exaggerated language to emphasise the huge abundance



of possessions (s)he acquired. The purpose seems to be, following on from 2:1-3, to illustrate the ultimate that can be achieved in the pursuit of pleasure.

One of the most significant ambiguities in the passage concerns the meaning of the verb עשה. As we noted above, in vv.5,6 עשיתי is used for creative activity similar to בניתי and נטעתי, but in v.8 it is more like קניתי and כנסתי, and describes acquisition. The former is considerably more positive, and these different senses of the verb are important when it is used so often throughout the book - both of human and divine activity. These verbs also illustrate the propensity of the author to use different words to indicate the same thing, and the same word to mean different things. This is an important aspect of the ambiguity of Qohelet.

There are some further points of ambiguity or anomaly which should be noted. The first point to note is the *zaqeph* above לִי in v.5. There seems to be no good reason why it is used here, and is not used in this way elsewhere in these verses - particularly in v.6 and the second half of v.8 which otherwise follow a very similar pattern<sup>88</sup>. However, the punctuation and the verse divisions hinder rather than aid discernment of structure in this passage: the separation of vv.5,6 into two verses while two items in the list are combined in v.8 provides a good example of this.

The pronominal ending on מהם is masculine while the noun it represents, ברכות, is feminine. Considering the importance of masculine and feminine plural endings in these verses, it may be that the masculine form is used to balance בהם in v.5. However, it should be noted that the feminine third person plural suffix is not used at all in Qohelet, while in 2:6,10; 10:19; 11:8; 12:1 a masculine form is used with a feminine noun.

The problem with v.7 is working out how the verse should be divided. If we follow the pauses marked in the MT, the phrase ובני-בית היה לי is a clause which is independent of the preceding words, but there are two anomalies in this phrase as it stands. Firstly, the usual word order is reversed so that the object precedes the verb, which often indicates that particular importance is placed on the object - but there is no apparent reason why the object in this

<sup>88</sup>The *zaqeph*s above לִי in v.7c and v.9a are different because on both occasions they are followed by the comparative *mem*.

clause, בני-בית, should be emphasised. Secondly, the plural בני-בית takes a singular verb<sup>89</sup>. Together these two anomalies draw attention to this seemingly unimportant clause.

An alternative might be to ignore the *zaqeph*s and the *athnah* in the MT, and regard היה as the first word of the next clause where it would tie in with the singular מקנה. This would give us three clauses which follow a similar pattern to the rest of the list:

קניתי עבדים ושפחות ובני-בית  
היה לי גם מקנה בקר וצאן  
הרבה היה לי מכל שהיו לפני בירושלם

Moreover, these phrases would make better sense than the awkward ones suggested by the pauses - and the only word which is out of normal grammatical order and which disrupts the pattern of the list is הרבה, which is highly appropriate in this passage which focuses so much on increase. Two counter-arguments might be offered to this division: (1) בני-בית as normally understood (i.e., 'slaves born in the household') seems an inappropriate object for קניתי, and (2) the singular היה occurs elsewhere in Qohelet (as, for example, in 2:9) where a plural would be expected. Nonetheless, this division provides a more satisfactory structure, it makes more sense grammatically, and it gives a more coherent line of argument through the passage.

מקנה has also occasioned some debate amongst commentators<sup>90</sup> because as pointed it reads 'cattle' which seems redundant in the context, while repointing to read 'purchase' or 'possession' fits the context well and ties in with the opening verb. However, the words מקנה, בקר and צאן do occur together elsewhere<sup>91</sup>, and there may be a deliberate play here on two different words from the same root, קנה.

The expression שרה ושרות, at the end of v.8 is somewhat enigmatic. The words occur nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible and do not have exact equivalents elsewhere. The meanings ascribed to them range through male and female cupbearers, hot and cold water taps, heaps, sedan-chairs, musical instruments, concubines, demons and females!<sup>92</sup> BDB (p.994) suggests that they should possibly be read as שרה ושרות, 'princess and princesses'. However, they may derive from the same root as the word שר, meaning 'female breast'. We might note that שר

<sup>89</sup>It could be an example of what Gesenius (145u) describes as 'a case where the singular dependent genitive has attracted the verb to its number.' This is put more simply by Crenshaw (1988:80) when he says, 'The singular verb (*hayah*) has probably resulted from its attraction to the nearer personal pronoun (*li*) or the word for house (*bayit*).' However, it is plural in 3 mss., LXX, Syr, and Tg.

<sup>90</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:90).

<sup>91</sup>E.g., Gen 26:14; 47:17; 2 Chr 32:29.

<sup>92</sup>For more details see Barton (1912:91).



occurs in Cant 7:4, and may be one of the **תענוגים** described in 7:7. Discoveries at Amarna and Ugarit also indicate that a similar word to **שדה** existed elsewhere in the region, and bore the meaning 'woman' or 'concubine'<sup>93</sup>. In view of these considerations of **שדה ושרות**, and their connection with **תענוגות**, it is probable that the last part of this verse refers to sexual delights associated with the female body - perhaps we cannot, without further evidence, be more exact than that. It may be that **שדה ושרות** was current slang, possibly even an expression too crude to find its way into 'normal' religious literature. It would thus serve as a suitable conclusion to the list of increasingly hedonistic activities. It may also have been chosen partly because of its similarity in sound and particularly appearance to **שרים ושרות** earlier in the verse.

**והוספתי** in v.9 is ambiguous because it is not clear what has been increased. The verb is hiphil, suggesting that the author *caused* something to increase, but no object is supplied. It may be that (s)he increased possessions, implied from the preceding verses; it may be that (s)he caused him- or herself to increase, perhaps increasing greatness; or it may be that his/her wisdom increased, as in 1:16. The singular verb **היה** implies that the subject of this verb, and perhaps also the object of **והוספתי**, is singular - which could be wealth or wisdom - or it may be that the verb is misleading, the next clause meaning 'more than *those who were* before me in Jerusalem.' Exactly the same problem arose in relation to 1:16, but the similarities and differences between the two verses serve only to confuse the issue further:

הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה	על כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם	1:16
וגדלתי והוספתי	מ- כל ש- היה לפני ב- יורשלם	2:9

V.10 constitutes the conclusion to this passage, and the use twice of words from the root **שמח** may suggest that it is also a response to the 'test of pleasure' initiated in 2:1,2. Particularly, it may be the, or an, answer to the question in 2:2, **לשמחה מה-זה עשה**, [אמרתי]. Moreover, the use twice of the expression **מכל-עמלי** may indicate that the verse provides an answer to the question, **מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש**, in 1:3. The comprehensiveness of the conclusion is emphasised by the use four times of **כל** - the most often it occurs in any verse in Qohelet. However, it is not at all clear just what that conclusion is. That Qohelet denied himself no pleasure is obvious, and emphasised by repetition, but what it

<sup>93</sup>See, e.g., Whitley (1979:22).

achieved is less clear. The first difficulty concerns the word עַמַּל: what does it mean in this context? Fox (1989:181) argues that both occurrences are ambiguous, saying that עַמַּל here 'may refer to the immediate source of pleasure, i.e., Qohelet's wealth, or to the farther source, i.e., his toil,' and Crenshaw (1988:82) observes that 'Qohelet's fondness for wrenching more than one meaning out of a word appears to be operative in 2:10.'

More important are the implications of the final clause, וְזֶה-הִיא חֶלְקִי מִכָּל-עֲמָלִי, חֶלֶק, meaning 'portion, share', occurs eight times in Qohelet (2:10,21; 3:22; 5:17,18; 9:6,9; 11:2), but what function it serves is not clear: is it a positive term signifying the good things God grants during life 'under the sun'; or is it a neutral term describing what one earns by the work or deeds (s)he does; or is it a negative term describing the limitations under which people must live their lives? Five of the eight occurrences of this word involve 'work', עַמַּל (2:10,21; 5:17,18; 9:9), and another two involve 'deeds', עֲשָׂה (3:22; 9:6)<sup>94</sup>. Of these, three describe שִׂמְחָה in one's work/deeds (2:10; 3:22; 5:18). Another three describe what is given by God (5:17,18; 9:9). Three times חֶלֶק describes what happens תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, and חֶלֶק ... עַל-הָאָרֶץ in 11:2 may be synonymous. From these we may conclude that חֶלֶק is in some way related to a person's work or deeds, it may involve pleasure, it is given by God, and it is related to life תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ. This last statement finds its strongest support in 9:6 which says of those who have died that חֶלֶק אֵין-לָהֶם עוֹד לְעוֹלָם בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ.

Nonetheless, in 2:10 חֶלֶק could be either negative or positive: the final clause could be interpreted 'and this was *all* I got from all my work/wealth', or 'and I got great pleasure from all my work/wealth'<sup>95</sup>. Thus, while it is clear that 2:4-10 catalogues Qohelet's deeds, the

<sup>94</sup>The eighth, 11:2, appears to be a proverbial saying and is rather different to the other occurrences.

<sup>95</sup>Before leaving this section, it is worth considering how closely it might describe Solomon's situation. The most we can say with confidence is, as Loader (1986:28) puts it,

He paints his life of pleasure in colors that fit a typical king of the ancient East and that, in accordance with the tradition of Solomon's wisdom (1 Kings 3) and the heading of 1:1, reinforce the image of "Solomon the Preacher".

Loader proceeds thus with a comparison of these verses with the biblical account of Solomon's wealth:

His building projects may be compared with the report of Solomon's activities in 1 Kings 9:10,15,17ff. The reference to vineyards, gardens, and parks planted with fruit trees agrees with what we read in 1 Chronicles 27:27-28 concerning the crown possessions of his father David and with the mention of a royal garden in 2 Kings 25:4. Such specially constructed gardens could be watered only with the aid of conduits, to which Nehemiah 3:15-16 refers. The reference to his great herds and flocks again agrees with a similar statement about his father's property (1 Chron. 27:29ff). Male and female slaves are mentioned in the same breath as herds and flocks because they were simply considered their master's property. Solomon used them for forced labor (1 Kings 9:15-22) and at his court (1 Kings 10:14ff); indeed Solomon could claim to have gathered together the riches of kings and provinces (1 Kings 10:23-25). Counted among Solomon's personnel were singers, though they served in the temple (2 Chron. 5:13); in a later report, which comes down from the Assyrian king Sennacherib, we read of male and female musicians who were connected with the royal court of Jerusalem. Finally, we learn of the harem, a typi-



response to this in v.10 is somewhat indeterminate, and leaves the reader to work out whether it is a positive or negative evaluation.

#### 8.1.4 2:11-19

2:11-19 picks up the theme of wisdom from 1:12-2:3 by comparing wisdom with folly. However, the examination of wisdom and madness and folly is expressed slightly differently in 1:17 and 2:12:

הוללות ושכלות	חכמה ודעת	לבי לדעת	ואתנה	1:17
והוללות וסכלות	חכמה	אני לראות	ופניתי	2:12

The comparison between wisdom/the wise person and folly/the fool is drawn seven times in this passage, but here too the words used are slightly different each time:

חכמה והוללות	וסכלות <sup>96</sup>	v.12
לחכמה	מן- הסכלות	v.13
החכם	... והכסיל	v.14
והכסיל	... חכמתי	v.15
לחכם	עם- הכסיל	v.16
החכם	עם- הכסיל	v.16
החכם	... סכל	v.19

The middle one of these reverses the order in which the words appear, otherwise wisdom is always first. The comparison starts by exploring the abstract concepts of 'wisdom' and 'folly', but becomes more concrete as it proceeds to compare 'the wise person' and 'the fool'. At the centre it becomes personal as the author's own wisdom is the issue. Up to the centre of the passage the difference between wisdom and folly is noted, the preposition מן- being one indicator of this, but in the second half it is the similarities which are explored, as the repeated use of -עם signifies.

An intriguing question which these comparisons raise concerns the use in Qohelet of words from two different roots for folly, סכל and כסל. סכל occurs twelve (2:3,12,13,19; 7:17,25; 10:1,3,3,6,13,14) or thirteen times (+ שכלות in 1:17?) in total, while כסל is used nineteen times (2:14,15,16,16; 4:5,13,17; 5:2,3; 6:8; 7:4,5,6,9,25; 9:17; 10:2,12,15). From

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cal part of every Eastern court in ancient times; with it, too, Solomon gained special renown (1 Kings 11:3).

See also Crocker (1990:20-3).

<sup>96</sup>Fox (1989:183) is one of a number of commentators who suggest that והוללות וסכלות is a hendiads meaning something like 'senseless folly'. This is a grammatical possibility, but we should note that much the same sense is achieved in 7:25 by the expression והסכלות הוללות - that is, without the waw between the two words, and הוללות acting as an adjective modifying הסכלות.

this point in the book until ch.10 it is כסל that predominates, while in ch.10 סכל is more frequent<sup>97</sup>. Neither appears in the last two chapters.

כסל is the more common root in the Hebrew Bible, but this is due to nearly fifty occurrences in Prov. It is used elsewhere only in three psalms<sup>98</sup> and Qohelet. Of these, Ps 49:11 is particularly pertinent because the sentiments expressed there are identical to those in 2:14b-16,18-19 in this passage: כִּי יִרְאֶה חֲכָמִים יָמוּתוּ יֶחֶד כַּסִּיל וּבָעַר יֹאבְדוּ וְעֹזְבוֹ לְאַחֲרִים חִילָם<sup>99</sup>. By contrast, סכל occurs ten times outside Qohelet, none of which is in the wisdom literature<sup>100</sup>. A close examination of the contexts in which it is found outside Qohelet reveals that they involve moral or religious wrongdoing<sup>101</sup>, while study of the use of כסל shows that it does not of itself bear this sense<sup>102</sup>, though in some passages it is linked to wrongdoing<sup>103</sup>. However, this distinction cannot be maintained for the use of the two roots in Qohelet where there seems to be no difference whatsoever in the way they are used. In the vast majority of cases there is no suggestion of an evil aspect to the 'folly' mentioned - it is simply used as the antithesis of חכמה. A good example is the use of סכל, which elsewhere appears to bear overtones of evil, in 2:3, וּלְאַחַז בַּסְּכָלוֹת עַד אֲשֶׁר-אֵרְאֶה אִי-זֶה טוֹב לְבְנֵי הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ, כסל and סכל, are used on occasion in contexts where wrongdoing is implied: for example, כסל is used with רע in 4:17, וּקְרוֹב לִשְׁמַע מִתַּת הַכְּסִילִים זִבַּח כִּי אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע, and סכל in 10:5-6, יֵשׁ רָעָה רְאִיתִי ... נָתַן הַסָּכָל בַּמְרוּמִים רַבִּים. But in neither case is 'folly' itself described as evil or even bad. In 7:25 the two roots occur together (the only verse in the book where they do), and the nuance which we discerned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible seems to be reversed with כסל being linked to רשע, and הוללות to הסכלות.

<sup>97</sup>Neither כסל nor סכל occurs in chs.3,8; כסל appears three times in ch.4, twice in ch.5, once in ch.6, five times in ch.7 and once in ch.9, while in these chapters סכל is used only twice in ch.7. In ch.10 סכל occurs six times compared to three occurrences of כסל.

<sup>98</sup>Pss 49:11; 92:7; 94:8. כסיל also appears in Isa 13:10; Amos 5:8; Job 9:9; 38:31 in relation to constellations of stars. It is not clear if there is any connection with the root which we are considering.

<sup>99</sup>Because of the similarity in the sentiments of this verse in particular and the psalm in general with Qohelet, dependence one way or the other has been suggested. The interpretation of v.16 (v.15 in English) is crucial, and has a bearing also on Qohelet, אֶךְ-אֱלֹהִים יִפְרָה נַפְשִׁי מִיֶּד-שְׂאוֹל כִּי יִקְחֵנִי סָלָה.

<sup>100</sup>Gen 31:28; 1 Sam 13:13; 26:21; 2 Sam 15:31; 24:10; Jer 4:22; 5:21; 1 Chr 21:8; 2 Chr 16:9 and possibly Isa 44:25 (שכל).

<sup>101</sup>With the possible exception of 2 Sam 15:31. Isa 44:25 is also different, which may fuel the argument that שכל is not to be identified with סכל. In this passage it is the Lord who causes שכל which should probably not, therefore, be equated with moral or religious wrongdoing. In 2 Sam 15:31 David implores the Lord to make Ahithophel's counsel סכל which does not necessarily exclude the above sense of the word.

<sup>102</sup>See in particular Prov 17:16. Other clear examples are Prov 14:16 and 17:10.

<sup>103</sup>See, e.g., Prov 10:23; 13:19.



This passage shares with 1:12-2:3 the tendency to express the same thing or similar sentiments in different ways. Thus instead of **בכל-מעשי שעשו ידי** as in v.11, **הכעשה שנעשה** is used in v.17. **ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות** in v.11 changes to **את-כל-עמלי שאני עמל** in v.18, and **בכל-עמלי שעמלתי** in v.19. It is worth noting that similar but different phrases also occur in v.20 and v.22:

v.11	וב-	עמל	ש-	עמלתי לעשות ...	תחת השמש
v.18	את-כל-	עמלי	שאני עמל	תחת השמש	
v.19	ב-	עמלי	ש-	ושחכמתי עמלתי	תחת השמש <sup>104</sup>
v.20	כל-	העמל	ש-	עמלתי	תחת השמש
v.22	ב-	עמלו ...	שהוא עמל	תחת השמש	

Three different, but effectively synonymous phrases occur in vv.14,15,16:

v.14	שמקרה אחד יקרה את-כלם
v.15	כמקרה הכסיל גם-אני יקרני
v.16	ימות החכם עם הכסיל

These are important statements, and dramatic tension is created because it is only in the third of them that the 'one fate' is specifically described as death. Finally, the sentiments of the first part of v.16, **אין זכרון לחכם עם-הכסיל לעולם**, are reiterated in the second part the verse, **בשכבר הימים הבאים הכל נשכח**.

**ופניתי אני** is used at the beginning of vv.11,12, otherwise the verbs which are repeated also take different forms: **לראות** (v.12) and **וראיתי אני** (v.13); **וידעתי** (v.14) and **יודע** (v.19); **ושנאתי אני** (v.18) and **ושנאתי** (v.17); **ודברתי בלבי** (v.15) and **ואמרתי אנ בלבי** (v.15). We might also note, in addition to the observations above, that the verb **עשה** occurs in the forms **שעשו** (v.11), **לעשות** (v.11), **עשוהו** (v.12) and **שנעשה** (v.17).

Again this raises the question why these differences occur, and serves to highlight words and phrases that are repeated in exactly the same form, notably **אני** (vv.11,12,13,14, 15,15,15,18), **החכם** (vv.14,16,19) and **הכסיל** (vv.15,16,17), and **הכל הבל ורעות רוח** (vv.11,17), **גם-זה הבל** (vv.15,19) and **תחת השמש** (vv.11,17,18,19).

In terms of the ambiguity of this passage, v.12 is particularly difficult: the second half of the verse has been described by the commentators as 'difficult of interpretation'<sup>105</sup>,

<sup>104</sup>Gordis (1968:223; cf Barton, 1912:95; Crenshaw, 1988:88) comments that **שעמלתי ושחכמתי** is a hendiadys = "I toiled wisely". This seems to be a possible reading and gives a better rendering in English. However, the sense of the verse is little affected.

<sup>105</sup>Barton (1912:82).

‘unclear’<sup>106</sup>, ‘perplex[ing]’<sup>107</sup>, ‘an ancient *crux interpretum*’<sup>108</sup>, and Fox (1989:183) goes so far as to say that ‘Qoh. 2:12b makes no sense as it stands.’ The second half starts with the word כִּי, which may suggest that an explanation is to be offered for the first half. But this does not appear to happen. In fact, the latter part of the verse seems totally irrelevant to the former and interrupts a train of thought which is clearly continued in v.13. It may be for this reason that GNB transposes the clause to the end of v.11, while NEB and REB move it to the end of v.18. An alternative which Fox suggests (1989:183) is that ‘there may ... be an alternating structure here: 12b explaining 11, 13 explaining 12a.’

Besides its seeming irrelevance to its immediate context, there are two other difficulties in this part of the verse - one at the beginning and one at the end. The first concerns the words מִהֶהָאָדָם - there is no verb so it is not clear how these words relate to the rest of the verse. As they stand they could be rendered ‘What is the man who comes after the king?’. But some commentators<sup>109</sup> (and RSV, NIV and REB) would agree with Crenshaw (1988:83) when he argues that, ‘In context, *meh-ha’adam* seems to require a form of the verb ‘*asah*, probably *ya’aseh*’<sup>110</sup>. He goes on to explain,

The verb may have dropped out of the Hebrew text by homoioteleuton, the scribe’s eye having jumped from the *he* in *meh* to the final *he* of *ya’aseh*. Or (less likely), *ya’aseh* may have been suppressed by the similar verb at the end of the verse.

In this case the clause would be better rendered, ‘What can the man do who comes after the king?’.

The translation of the final word in the verse, עָשָׂהוּ has a bearing on this matter. It appears to be the third person perfect plural with the third person singular ending, which would give something like ‘they made him’ or ‘they made/did it’. It might also be read as a passive with the sense, ‘that which has been done’<sup>111</sup>. Reading the verse as it stands, we might then translate, ‘What is the man who comes after the king? What they have already made him.’ Alternatively we might either read the verb עָשָׂה back from the end of the verse, or assume it has dropped out, and render the verse, ‘What can the man do who comes after the

<sup>106</sup>Crenshaw (1988:83).

<sup>107</sup>Eaton (1983:68).

<sup>108</sup>Gordis (1968:219).

<sup>109</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:92-3); Whitley (1979:23-4).

<sup>110</sup>This is suggested also in BHS.

<sup>111</sup>A number of manuscripts read עָשָׂהוּ, ‘he made/did it’, or possibly ‘he made him’. LXX, Syr. and Vulg. also have the singular.



king? What has already been done.' This would tie in reasonably well with v.11 because it would indicate that no-one who came after the king (presumably Qohelet) could do more than he had done, and that had brought no יתרון. It would also reflect the sentiments of 1:9-10. However, this second half of v.12 does not read easily, and the awkwardness may be part of its design, rather than due to scribal error.

We have already noted that death is not specifically mentioned until the end of v.16. Instead the word מקרה is used. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the root קרה bears the meaning 'encounter, meet, befall'<sup>112</sup>. It is used in the sense of 'encounter' five times to describe a meeting with God<sup>113</sup> and once of an unfortunate encounter with an enemy<sup>114</sup>. Of things that 'happen to' or 'befall' a person, on six occasions it describes bad occurrences<sup>115</sup> and four times good ones<sup>116</sup>. Twice קרה refers to things that God will cause to happen in the future<sup>117</sup>, and twice more the word represents 'the good things that God brings about' - once requested<sup>118</sup> and once granted<sup>119</sup>. The word מקרה occurs only three times outside Qohelet, in 1 Sam 6:9; 20:26 and Ruth 2:3. In each case the emphasis is quite clearly and specifically on an *unintentional* happening. In Ruth it is her intention that is emphatically denied by the phrase ויקר מקרה. In v.20 Yahweh is thanked for this 'chance' happening, and it may be implied that it was in fact part of Yahweh's purpose<sup>120</sup>. But in 1 Sam 6 it is Yahweh's intention that is denied by the use of this word. It is used in a passage where the Philistines are trying to determine whether the affliction which had befallen them came from Yahweh *or* was the result of מקרה. It is clearly shown to be from Yahweh in a passage where he is depicted as being very much in control of events<sup>121</sup>. In 1 Sam 20:26 King Saul puts David's absence at the dinner table down to מקרה, rather than any intention on David's part - although again the verse is embedded in a passage full of subtle indicators that Yahweh is controlling events. In

<sup>112</sup>A second root is used only in the piel, meaning 'lay the beams of, furnish with beams' (cf BDB p.900).

<sup>113</sup>Exod 3:18; Num 13:3,4,15,16.

<sup>114</sup>Deut 25:18.

<sup>115</sup>Gen 42:29; 44:29; Deut 23:11; 1 Sam 28:10; Esth 4:7; 6:13.

<sup>116</sup>Num 11:23; 35:11; 2 Sam 1:6; Ruth 2:3.

<sup>117</sup>Isa 41:22; Dan 10:14.

<sup>118</sup>Gen 24:12.

<sup>119</sup>Gen 27:20. In Leviticus ch.26 a form of the root is found which appears nowhere else, קרי (vv.21,23,24,27,28,40,41). It seems to mean 'contrary to' or 'in opposition to', and it is unclear how it relates to the other occurrences of this root - if indeed it is the same root.

<sup>120</sup>See in particular Ruth 1:6,9,20,21; 2:4,12,20; 3:10; 4:11-14,17-22.

<sup>121</sup>See in particular 1 Sam 5:6,9,11.

fact, that this event is not a 'chance' happening is specifically stated four verses earlier where David is told, לך כי שלחך יהוה.

This study of the root קרה would support the translation of the verb as 'encounter, meet, befall', and suggest that the noun refers to things which happen without any intention behind them. As Eaton (1983:69-70) points out, 'none of these carries any arbitrary, fatalistic overtones.' However, opinion is divided concerning the use of קרה in Qohelet. Crenshaw (1988:84), on the one hand, regards it as having 'an ominous nuance everywhere in Ecclesiastes,' although he concedes that it is 'neutral outside the book of Ecclesiastes.' On the other hand, Whybray (1989a:58) maintains that 'in Qoheleth's thought' מקרה 'does not signify an impersonal or malignant force, but is a "neutral" term signifying simply what happens.' In fact, קרה appears to be another root which in its general usage is a neutral term, and is open to different interpretation in Qohelet. It becomes clear in v.16 that מקרה in this passage refers to death - the one 'happening' which all people can be certain of, however wise or foolish they are. Indeed, wherever words from the root קרה appear (2:14,14; 2:15,15; 3:19,19,19; 9:2,3,11), with the possible exception of 9:11, it is death that is alluded to. What precisely the implications are, and whether or not death casts a shadow over all that happens 'under the sun', is one of the major issues that Qohelet addresses.

It is worth noting that although the root קרה is used a few times to refer to death, its use is different each time:

יקרה את-כלם	שמקרה אחד	2:14
<u>יקרני</u>	הכסיל גם-אני	2:15
	מקרה	3:19
	בני האדם	
	ומקרה	
	הבהמה	
	ומקרה אחד	
	מקרה אחד	לכל 9:2
	מקרה אחד	לכל 9:3
יקרה את-כלם	עת ופגע	9:11?

The question, ולמה חכמתי אני אז יותר, in v.15 is ambiguous. Is Qohelet asking, 'why have I been *excessively* wise?', or 'why have I been *exceedingly* wise?'. The same issue arises over the advice offered in 7:16 (the only other occasion when the same form of יותר occurs), אל-תהי צדיק הרבה ואל-תתחכם יותר, where יותר is again applied to wisdom. There is a subtle difference between the two translations. The first suggests that the author has been more wise than (s)he ought, perhaps in the hope of gaining greater advantage. The implication that follows is that there is a limit to how much one should pursue wisdom - it is possible to be *too*



wise. The second suggests that great wisdom is ultimately futile because it does not save its possessor from the same fate as the fool. The implication that follows is that wisdom is ultimately no better than folly - any apparent advantage being wiped out by death. The second is considerably more negative. In either case the clause serves as a response to the statements concerning wisdom in 1:13,16,17 and 2:3,9:

ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה	1:13
ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת	1:16
ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה	1:17
ולבי נהג בחכמה	2:3
אף חכמתי עמדה לי	2:9

It also ties in well with the first half of the proverb in 1:18, **כי ברב חכמה רב-כעס**.

In 2:18 **עמלי** is again ambiguous because it could indicate either 'my work' or 'my wealth'. There may be a deliberate play on the word's meaning (as there certainly is in the next section) because in the first half of the verse on a first reading 'I hated all my work' seems more likely than 'I hated all my wealth', but **שאניחנו** in the second half seems more likely to refer to wealth than work. The word **שאניחנו** itself plays on its similarity to **שאני** three words earlier and **אני** three words before that.

Crenshaw (1988:87) very clearly displays his inclination to read everything in Qohelet pessimistically when he says of v.19,

The rhetorical question *mi yodea'* (who knows) occurs ten times in the Hebrew Bible (2 Sam 12:22; Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9; Ps 90:11; Esth 4:14; Prov 24:22; Eccl 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1). In the first five texts the object of knowledge retains freedom to act unexpectedly. Qohelet (cf. Prov 24:22) closes the door to surprise. In his hands *mi yodea'* expresses utter skepticism.

It does seem that each time **מי יודע** is used in Qohelet, the answer 'no-one' is expected, but this need not be a sign of 'utter skepticism': it may be a comment on the limits to human knowledge which is an important theme in the latter half of the book, especially in those verses expressing human inability to know the future, all of which involve a question starting with **מי**. It is also possible that the answer to the question, 'who knows?' is 'God knows'. We are specifically informed in 2:26 that God gives knowledge, and in 8:17 that however much a wise person may *claim* to know, he cannot find out what God does, this sentiment being repeated also in 11:5-6.

We have noted a number of ambiguous words in 2:11-19 and some differences in words and phrases which make precise interpretation difficult. But the most significant feature of the passage in terms of its ambiguity is the author's ambivalence towards wisdom and folly.

This is carried by a number of clauses which stand in tension with each other. In the first verse it is clearly stated, **אין יתרון תחת השמש** (v.11), but already in v.13 this is called into question, **יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות**. However, doubt is cast on this statement in turn by the ambiguous question **למה חכמתי אני אז יותר** in v.15, and **אין זכרון לחכם עם-הכסיל לעולם** in v.16 where there is a play on the similarity of **אין יתרון** and **אין זכרון**. As a result, the question with which the passage ends effectively asks the reader, 'who knows whether wisdom is actually an advantage over folly?', and leaves the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, and to work out what bearing the fact of death has on the question.

#### 8.1.5 2:20-26

**אני סבותי** in v.20 appears to serve much the same purpose as **פניתי אני** in 2:11,12, which raises the now familiar question why a different word is used here. In fact, 2:20 may be designed to pick up in abbreviated form the main focus of 2:11 so as to re-apply it in this final section of 1:4-2:26:

2:11	ופניתי אני	בכל-מעשי שעשו ידי	ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות...	תחת השמש
2:20	וסבותי אני	ליאש את-לבי על	העמל שעמלתי	תחת השמש

As Barton (1912:95)<sup>122</sup> points out, v.21 contains 'a balanced rhetorical expression':

יש אדם ש-	עמלו בחכמה	ובדעת ובכשרון
ולאדם שלא	עמל-בו	יתננו חלקו

A contrast is drawn between **אדם שעמלו ב-** in the first half of the verse, and **אדם שלא עמל-בו** in the second half. Again the word **עמל** is ambiguous - was the first person's *work* performed in wisdom, knowledge and success<sup>123</sup>, or was his/her *wealth* in wisdom, knowledge and success, or was the wealth acquired by wisdom, knowledge and success. The sense is somewhat different: in the first and third the person involved works wisely, knowledgeably and successfully in order to obtain material wealth; while in the second wealth *is* wisdom, knowledge and success. A related ambiguity concerns **בו** in the second half of the verse. The parallelism of the verse suggests that **בו** relates to **בכשרון ובדעת ובחכמה**. This would indicate that someone who did not work with wisdom, knowledge and success nonetheless was given the portion of

<sup>122</sup>See also, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:88).

<sup>123</sup>**כשרון** is unique to Qohelet, although the root occurs three times elsewhere (Ps 68:7; Prov 31:19; Esth 8:5). In all the occurrences of the root, and particularly of the word **כשרון** in Qoh 2:21; 4:4 and 5:10, the translation 'success' is more appropriate than the common rendering 'skill'. Cf, e.g., the RSV.



the first person. However, in this case the pronominal suffix ought to be plural - although we have already observed a number of instances in Qohelet where such grammatical norms are not followed. Alternatively, בו might point forward to חלקו, indicating that although the second person did not work for it him- or herself, nonetheless (s)he was given the first person's portion. A third option, if שעמלו refers to wealth, is to see this wealth as the thing referred to: although the second person did not work for the wealth (s)he nonetheless was given the first person's portion. Probably there is a deliberate play on both words here, so that although the reader should be able to grasp the general sense, (s)he has to contribute to the precise meaning - particularly in discerning how 'wisdom, knowledge and success' fit into the equation.

The end of v.21, גם-זה הבל ורעה רבה, adds an ironic twist because of its similarity to the catchphrase גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח. We noted above the alternating pattern of key phrases in sections B, C and B' of chs.1,2:

הכל הבל ורעות רוח	1:14
גם-הוא הבל	2:1
הכל הבל ורעות רוח	2:11
גם-זה הבל	2:15
הכל הבל ורעות רוח	2:17
גם-זה הבל	2:19

At this point the pattern changes:

גם-זה הבל ורעה רבה	2:21
גם-זה הבל הוא	2:23
גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח	2:26

The relationship between v.21 and v.26 is important because there seems to be some tension between the two verses. The question arises whether שעמלו בחכמה וברעות in v.21 is to be equated with אדם טוב לפניו to whom God gives wisdom and knowledge in v.26. If so, we have some difficulties in harmonising these two verses - perhaps we are not intended to: Whybray (1989a:65) simply states that 'Qoheleth duly records the contradiction', while Ogden (1987:49) asserts, 'neither 2.21 nor 2.26 can represent the totality of truth, but each may be true in given circumstances.' Alternatively, the two may be different: perhaps the one who is 'good before God' is given wisdom and knowledge of a different order to the human (even self-centred) 'wisdom and knowledge' with which the other operates - and which, according to 1:18, brings רב-כעס and יוסיף מכאוב; or perhaps wisdom and knowledge sought

for their own ends, or for the end of acquiring wealth, is being compared to wisdom and knowledge accepted as God's gift<sup>124</sup>.

The major point of ambiguity in vv.22,23, and perhaps even v.24, is who **לָאָדָם** and all the pronominal suffixes refer to: it could be either the first or second of the people mentioned in v.21 (exactly the same problem arises in 4:13-16; 5:14-16; 6:4-5). **לָאָדָם** might also refer to any person, as the translation 'a man' in RSV suggests and as may be indicated by the participle **הוּוֹה**, but **לָאָדָם** is definite while **אָדָם** twice in v.21 and once in v.26 is indefinite. The verses might follow on from v.21 if it is the second person whose situation is described in the following verses: what becomes of *that* person in all his/her (inherited) wealth and in all the desires of his/her heart which is what (s)he works for? It is perhaps no wonder this person lives in vexation and works in pain and cannot sleep when all (s)he works for is to fulfil the desires of his or her heart. However, if the author is describing his/her own disillusionment with work and wealth, the verses also make good sense reading **לָאָדָם** either as the first person in v.21, or as 'anyone' - including the reader. The indeterminacy regarding the subject of these verses (and elsewhere) may be intended to prompt the reader to fill in the gap - to whom do these words apply, might they even apply to the reader him- or herself?

2:24 is the first of the verses issuing the 'call to enjoyment.' This verse starts **אֵין-טוֹב**, and three other verses contain the same words, but the prepositions following these words should be noted:

אֵין-טוֹב בָּאָדָם שִׂיאָכֵל וְשִׂתָּה וְהִרְאָה אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ טוֹב בַּעֲמָלוֹ	2:24
אֵין טוֹב בָּם כִּי אִם-לְשִׂמְחָה וּלְעִשׂוֹת טוֹב בְּחַיָּיו	3:12
אֵין טוֹב מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׁיו	3:22
אֵין-טוֹב לְאָדָם תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כִּי אִם לֵאכּוֹל וּלְשִׂתּוֹת וְהוּא יִלְוֶנוּ בַּעֲמָלוֹ	8:15

These are all very similar and have lead almost all commentators to postulate that a *mem* which once followed **בָּאָדָם** has dropped out of 2:24, possibly by haplography<sup>125</sup>. Loader (1986:31-2) however reads the verse as it stands in MT and argues,

<sup>124</sup>Cf Clemens (1994:7).

<sup>125</sup>Fox (1989:188) says 'The emendation of *b'dm shy'kl* to *b'dm mshy'kl*, with a comparative *mem* as in 3:22, seems hardly disputable.' Crenshaw (1988:89), Eaton (1983:75), Barton (1912:96), Gordis (1968:225-6), Whybray (1989:63) all agree, as do NIV, NEB and RSV. There is also support from Pesh., Vulg. and some mss of LXX. Schoors (1992:194) states, 'in Qoheleth's "enjoy"-formulas **בַּעֲמָלוֹ** can always be interpreted in the sense of a *beth pretii*.'



The final part of the poem begins with a statement that strikes some commentators as so strange that they want to change the Hebrew text. For the Preacher says in so many words that it is *not* good for a man to eat and drink and to afford enjoyment for all his toil. Because in another place he says practically the opposite (cf. 3:12,22), the commentators think something has to be inserted at the beginning to bring the meaning of the sentence into line with later pronouncements. But there is not a single reason for this. The point here is not that the Preacher's pessimism brings him to a conclusion that makes pleasure the most desirable option; the point is to illustrate the incalculability of God's intervention in human life. This becomes plain when we look at the matter in retrospect<sup>126</sup>.

However, there is no need to read the text in such a way that it contradicts the sentiments of 3:12,22. This is indicated, for example, by the translation given in the REB, 'To eat and drink and experience pleasure in return for his labours, this does not come from any good in a person: it comes from God.' Following this line, we can trace a development in this thread of verses, which, typical of Qohelet, express similar but subtly different sentiments in different ways each time:

- 2:24        There is nothing good in the person who eats and drinks and enjoys his work - I saw that it is from the hand of God.
- 3:12,13    I know that there is nothing good in them except to enjoy themselves and do good in their lives; also all people who eat and drink and enjoy all their work - it is the gift of God.
- 3:22        I saw that there is nothing better than that a person enjoys his/her work, for that is his/her portion.
- 8:15        I lauded pleasure because there is nothing good for a person under the sun except to eat and drink and enjoy oneself, and it will accompany him/her in his/her work through the days of life that God gives to him/her under the sun.

This is quite in keeping with the use of language we have observed so far in Qohelet.

The question arises here again whether the definite article in באדם indicates a specific person, or anybody. It might refer to the second person in 2:21, in which case the verse might be interpreted, 'There is nothing good in this person who eats and drinks and enjoys his wealth - I saw that these things are from the hand of God' - and, perhaps, by implication not of his/her own doing. וברעיון לבו שהוא עמל might then reflect back to עמל in v.22 if the latter is rendered, 'and in the desire of his/her heart for which (s)he works.' However, elsewhere in Qohelet אדם is often used with the article where no particular person is indicated, as seems to be the case, for example, in 8:15, so the same might apply here.

טוב seems to be used in three different ways in vv.24,26<sup>127</sup>. At the start of v.24 it probably means 'good', or possibly 'better'. However, the second time it is used in this verse

<sup>126</sup>Loader adds in a footnote, 'The author's translation of 2:24 begins, "It is not good that man should eat and drink and give himself enjoyment in his toil."' Cf Schoors (1992:194,196-7).

<sup>127</sup>Similarly in 3:12,13 and 5:17,18 which we will consider below.

it may indicate pleasure or wealth. It is followed by בעמלו which might be translated either 'in his/her work', or 'in his/her wealth', so together the two words mean either 'pleasure in his/her work', 'wealth from his/her work', or 'pleasure in his/her wealth'. The last is the most hedonistic. טוב in v.26 is also ambiguous - it could indicate a person who is morally good, or one who pleases God. The implications of the two may be quite different.

It is not clear why היא ... גם-זה is feminine. The only feminine noun is נפש, but it seems a rather unlikely antecedent because it plays so minor a role in the first half of the verse. Nonetheless, grammatically it makes most sense - although grammar seems to be far from a sure guide in Qohelet. The other occurrences of נפש in Qohelet seem to imply that it is regarded as the seat of the desires<sup>128</sup>:

ולמי אני עמל ומחסר את-נפשי מטובה	4:8
ואיננו חסר לנפשו מכל אשר-יתאוה	6:2
ונפשו לא-תשבע מן-הטובה	6:3
כל-עמל האדם לפיהו וגם הנפש לא תמלא	6:7
טוב מראה עינים מהלך נפש	6:9

It may be this aspect of human nature that is at issue here, too - is this, then, what God gives?

V.25 is obscure. The word יאכל probably picks up on its use in the previous verse, but its meaning here may well be different. While אכל usually refers to eating, it can also mean 'enjoy', as it does in Qoh 5:18; 6:2,2, and this may be how it should be rendered in this verse. There is probably a play on the two meanings of the word.

The meaning of יחוש is uncertain. It occurs only here in Qohelet and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it bears the meaning 'haste' or 'hasten'. Whybray (1989:64) acknowledges this, but adds, 'this makes no sense here.' Fox (1989:188) confidently asserts, '*yahush* means "worry", "fret" (a sense clearly attested in Job 20:2).' Ellermeier (1963:209) has argued for this sense by connecting יחוש to an Accadian word, *hashu(m)* which means 'worry, be anxious'<sup>129</sup>. Ogden (1987:48) equally confidently asserts the opposite, '*hush* means "to enjoy"'<sup>130</sup>. BDB (p.301-2) suggests that יחוש here is the only occurrence of a word from a root which has parallels in Arabic, Aramaic and NH meaning 'to feel, perceive', which in this verse means 'feel, enjoy pleasure'. Perhaps the author deliberately chose a word which has both positive and negative associations.

<sup>128</sup>7:28 may be an exception.

<sup>129</sup>Cf Castellino (1968:27n.10)

<sup>130</sup> de Waard (1979:521-7) argues at some length to come to the same conclusion.



הוֹן also occurs only here in Qohelet. Elsewhere it means 'outside'. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does it appear with מִן-, but in NH it is used with the preposition to mean 'except, without'. הוֹן מִמֶּנִּי might then be rendered 'except for me', or 'without me', giving the translation of this verse, 'for who can enjoy him-/herself and who can worry/feel pleasure except for me', or 'for who can enjoy him-/herself and who can worry/feel pleasure without me'<sup>131</sup>. These do not make much sense, however, and most commentators emend מִמֶּנִּי in line with LXX and Pesh., to מִמֶּנּוּ, 'from him', referring to God. However, Whitley (1979:29) cites other instances where a final *yodh* is used to indicate the third person<sup>132</sup>, and suggests that there is no need to emend the word here. Either way, this would give a reasonable interpretation of the verse: 'For who can enjoy him-/herself and who can worry/feel pleasure without God.' It is possible, of course, that the author intentionally says something quite unexpected, or that (s)he is deliberately playing on the double meaning of the suffix.

The final verse of ch.2, and of the section 1:4-2:26, illustrates well the way in which commentators interpret verses in Qohelet to support their own theories regarding its meaning. As Davidson (1986:20) says,

Verse 26 is an interesting example of the problems we face when we try to enter into Koheleth's mind. If we think that behind all Koheleth's questions there is a man who remains firm in the faith of his fathers, or if we think of him as a man who expresses and enters into the doubts of other people in order to help them through to a more certain faith, then we can read this verse as expressing such faith.... If, however, we see Koheleth, as this commentary does, as a man trying to come to terms with his own doubts, a man who has serious reservations about the faith in which he has been brought up, then we can read this verse differently.

Crenshaw (1988:90-1), for example, argues that, 'this verse takes the traditional categories, wise person and fool (sinner), and empties them of moral content'. He goes on to explain

Qohelet's observations transpose the motif, dear to the sages, that wicked people's wages eventually go to the devout (Prov. 13:22; 28:8 Job 27:16-17). Qohelet turns this cherished belief on its head. Since good people can and do lose their possessions to sinners, the disposer of goods must be indifferent to morality.

Fox (1989:189) concurs with this interpretation:

While most sages take it for granted that God is offended only by sin or moral folly, Qohelet believes that God (like a human ruler) may treat a person as offensive for inexplicable reasons and not necessarily because of actual sin or folly.

On the other hand, Ogden (1987:49) refers to this verse's 'deliberately positive note' which 'contrasts with that of v.21', while Whybray (1989a:65) argues that the author 'is here

<sup>131</sup>Cf the discussion in de Waard (1979), esp. p.514, and Schoors (1992:50-2).

<sup>132</sup>He quotes Ps 16:8 and 42:5 and also adduces Ugaritic and Phoenician parallels.

apparently accepting the "orthodox" view of divine reward and punishment', although he admits that it is 'neither wholly positive nor wholly negative'. Barton (1912:84) appears to accept that it is positive, but he adopts another common approach:

That the verse with the exception of the last clause is the work of a *chasid* glossator, must be granted. It contradicts Q's *fundamental philosophy*. The doctrine that all good things of life come to the morally good, finds expression in many parts of the O.T., and the thought that the good finally receive the fruits of the toil of the wicked is also not lacking ... Such a cheerful view of the moral order of the universe is, however, totally opposed to Q's whole thought, and justifies us in seeing here the work of another hand. [Our emphasis]

Such a statement begs the question 'what is, and how do we determine "Qohelet's fundamental philosophy"?' so that we can judge some verses uncharacteristic of his thought. This verse illustrates the difficulties we have in answering the question, and the susceptibility of the text of Qohelet to different interpretations.

Two of the key words for determining the meaning of 2:26 are טוב and חוטא. Again views differ as to the significance of these words. Crenshaw (1988:90) says,

Qohelet's predecessors used *tob* and *hote'* as ethical terms for good and bad people. Here, the two terms mean simply "fortunate and unfortunate, lucky and unlucky".

Again Fox (1989:188) agrees when he concurs with the 'many interpreters [who] recognize that the *hote'* here is not a sinner, but one who has incurred God's disfavour'<sup>133</sup>. Ogden (1987:49) seems unquestioningly to accept that חוטא refers to a 'sinner', while Whybray (1989a:64) argues that because the vast majority of the occurrences of חטא elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible clearly refer to 'sin', this is the most likely interpretation here<sup>134</sup>.

חטא in Qohelet seems usually to indicate 'sin' in the same sense as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. For example, in 8:12 it is stated that חטא עשה רע, and the next verse parallels יעשה טוב ולא יחטא is equated with the person who יעשה רשע with חטא in this verse; in 7:20 צדיק is equated with the person who יחטא and חטא in the second half of the verse are paralleled with צדיק and רשע in the

<sup>133</sup>Cf Fox and Porten (1978:34),

Qohelet says that God makes the *hote'*, the 'sinner' or 'fool' or 'unfortunate one,' gather property to give it to one whom God favors, while we know from 2:18-21 that this is just what Qohelet feels that *he* is doing - he himself is the *hote'*! [Their emphasis]

<sup>134</sup>Whybray (1989:64) says,

The interpretation of this verse depends on the meaning of the word *hote'*. Most commentators, on the basis of a few passages elsewhere in the O.T. (Jg. 20:16[H.]; Job 5:24; Prov. 8:36; 14:21; 19:2; 20:2; Isa. 65:20) and of usages of the same root in cognate languages, maintain that the word here means "to fail, miss, fall short" and lacks any religious or ethical connotations. (In some of the above cases this meaning is dubious.) On the other hand, there are 231 occurrences of the verb in the OT in which it means "to sin", together with 356 occurrences of nouns cognate with it where the meaning is undoubtably "sin".



first part of the verse, although the sentiments of this verse are very different to 2:26. In 7:26, טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה וחוטא ילכד בה, we find the same contrast between טוב and חוטא as in 2:26; and the use of לחטיא in 5:5 is in keeping with the usual biblical sense. However, in 9:18 and 10:4 חטא is used twice in a passage which focuses on wisdom and folly, and in 9:18 חוטא seems to be contrasted to חכמה in the same way that words from the roots סכל and כסל are elsewhere in that passage. An important aspect of the ambiguity of Qohelet is the uncertainty over what precisely such words as טוב and חטא (and רע, רשע, צדק - even חכם and סכל/כסל) mean: what is 'good' for a person, and what is it that makes a person a 'sinner'? The different interpretations of 2:26 serve to illustrate this ambiguity.

## 8.2 Conclusions

We noted above the balanced structure of 2:26 which compares the fate of החוטא with טוב לפני האלהים. The verse starts with a human being and ends with God - who, although he is referred to earlier in the verse by pronominal suffixes, is explicitly mentioned at the last possible moment, thus placing great emphasis upon him. This also means that, after being referred to only twice previously in 1:4-2:26, God features right at the end, with only the key phrase, גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח, following. However, besides emphasising God, this also increases the ambiguity of the passage because it is unclear whether some connection is intended between God and this final clause. In fact, this ending to 1:4-2:26 enshrouds the passage in ambiguity because it may serve as a comment on the whole of 1:4-2:26, or it may cast doubt on the positive conclusion of the final few verses, or it may just refer to the task given to the sinner. This is discussed in more depth in the section 3.3, 'Relating structure to interpretation' (pp.69-72).

2:26 is thus an excellent example of the ambiguous nature of 1:4-2:26: the precise sense of some of the words is unclear; the verse seems to bear some connection with 2:21, but it is far from clear what that link is; besides the difficulty in precise translation of the last five words, it is also uncertain how they relate to what precedes them; and the verse as a whole may be read as very positive, deeply ironic, or something in between. This means that 1:4-2:26 starts with a passage whose relation to the rest of the section is unclear, and ends with a phrase whose bearing on all that precedes, and indeed follows, it is far from obvious.

We have already seen that 1:4-2:26 is a very important section of Qohelet because most of the major themes of the book are introduced in these verses. This section also introduces many of the types of ambiguity which are so much a feature of Qohelet. For example, 1:4-11, besides being open to positive or negative interpretation, also provides examples of words which can be translated in different ways; it contains grammatical anomalies and unexpected pauses which complicate interpretation; its relation to what precedes and follows it is somewhat uncertain; and even the relation of its two halves to each other could be viewed in rather different ways. In 1:12-2:3 we find examples of root letters which could take several different meanings, as well as different words used with apparently the same meaning; there are phrases whose precise meanings are uncertain, as well as words and phrases repeated several times in slightly different forms; there are what appear to be key phrases whose antecedent is far from clear, and when it is clear what the author is saying, we also find a degree of ambivalence in the attitude (s)he displays; and this passage also sees the use of words which are unique to Qohelet in the Hebrew Bible, and prepositions used in ways which are rare or absent in other biblical texts. 2:4-10 provides an example of a word whose meaning changes subtly throughout the passage (עֲשֵׂה), as well as a variety of words apparently used with the same meaning; and it concludes with a statement which could be read negatively or positively, affecting the whole passage as a result. In 2:11-19 we find examples of what appear to be precisely the same thing expressed in different ways, and the word עָמַל is used to convey different things - it often being unclear how it should be translated; we find a question which could be rhetorical but might also be a genuine question; and there is half a verse (v.12b) which seems to make little sense in its context. 2:20-26 provides further examples of plays on words; it presents the first passage (vv.22-24) where the reader is forced to work hard to determine the antecedent of pronominal suffixes; it exhibits considerable tension between v.21 and v.26; and v.25 is somewhat obscure - these in addition to the hugely varied interpretations of v.26 which we noted above.



## CHAPTER 9, Divine Deeds, Human Deeds ... and Death (3:1-22)

### 9.1 Commentary

#### 9.1.1 3:1-8

Like the preceding section, ch.3 seems to be open to different, even diametrically opposed, interpretations. For example, Crenshaw<sup>1</sup> (1988:92) argues,

Qohelet concurs in the view that everything has its own moment (3:1-9), but he insists that humans cannot know those times (3:10-15), for God withholds that information. An *arbitrary deity* shapes human lives, allowing some persons to participate in pleasure and preventing others from doing so. [Our emphasis]

However, Ogden (1987:50) reads the same words in a very different light: he maintains,

As we progress from ch.2, in which Qoheleth highlighted his own considerable achievements, we notice that in ch.3 the emphasis moves to what God does. This transition is significant as it reflects the issue with which Qoheleth is grappling, namely man's place in God's world.

Ogden perceives in this the author's 'conviction that creation is marked by an orderliness which takes its origin in *the divine plan and will*' [our emphasis]. Does ch.3, then, picture a God who has established things according to certain patterns, or is the God portrayed one who is characterised by arbitrariness?

Ogden is certainly correct when he asserts that there is a change of emphasis in this chapter, and it is clear at least that the author continues his/her considerations from a rather different perspective. If 1:4-2:26 was written as if it came from the hand of King Solomon, there is little to suggest that this 'royal fiction' continues beyond ch.2. We noted above the linguistic features which distinguish ch.3 from chs.1,2, and particularly noteworthy among these is the great reduction in first person expressions and the increase in references to God and his activities. These observations support Ogden's contention that attention moves from Qohelet's achievements to what God does. How the first section of the chapter ties in with this move is not clear as it neither uses the first person, nor refers to God. In fact, much like 1:4-11, this passage shows no obvious connection with either the preceding or the following sections, the reader being left to make such connections him- or herself.

The first four words in 3:1 are carefully constructed so that two words for 'time' are brought together within two occurrences of the word **לכל זמן ועת לכל: לכל**. The repeated use

<sup>1</sup>Elsewhere Crenshaw (1974) discusses this passage in depth. He ascribes it a 'pivotal role' in the book of Qohelet.

of **לכל** emphasises that the following poem refers to *everything*, although the question arises whether **תחת השמים** is used to further emphasise the comprehensiveness of this verse, or to indicate its limits. The use of **זמן** and **עת** raises the question whether there is any difference between the two terms: the two occurrences of the three letters **לכל** (although they are pointed differently) are, after all, slightly different, the first meaning 'everything', the second being joined by a *maqep* to the word **חפץ** and meaning 'all' pleasures or 'all' purposes or 'all' matters. **עת** is a much more common word for 'time' in the Hebrew Bible, and is used forty times in Qohelet - twenty-eight of these in the next seven verses. Indeed, once more in this chapter it is used in the same phrase, and once elsewhere in a very similar expression:

לכל-חפץ	ועת	3:1
לכל-חפץ	כי-עת	3:17
לכל-חפץ יש עת		8:6

**עת** is the general word for 'time' in the Hebrew Bible, but, as we shall see, it is not always clear in Qohelet precisely what it implies.

**זמן** is used only here in Qohelet, and appears only six times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. It may be related to the root **זמם** which occurs about sixty times in the Hebrew Bible, though not in Qohelet, and bears the meaning 'consider, purpose, devise'<sup>2</sup>. On three occasions it is used as a pual participle with the meaning 'fixed' or 'appointed'<sup>3</sup>, each time modifying the plural **עתים** so that the two words together bear the sense of 'appointed times'. The other three occurrences of **זמן**<sup>4</sup> are all nouns which appear without **עת**, but seem to carry the same meaning as the two words convey together elsewhere. The word in Qoh 3:1 may, therefore, bear the sense of things having an 'appointed' time, perhaps indicating that not only do all things have an *appropriate* time, but they also have a time when they are 'appointed' to happen. This raises the question who it is that appoints these times - if it is God then his appointing may underlie all the 'times' described in the following verses. However, it should be borne in mind that the author of Qohelet not only uses the same word with different meanings (like **לכל** here), but also uses different words to convey exactly the same thing - **עת** and **זמן** might then be used simply as synonyms. This latter is clearly the view taken, for example,

<sup>2</sup>Chamakkala (1977:119) argues that it is 'a loan-word from Aramaic [which] occurs not only in Hebrew, but also is Syriac (*zēban*), Arabic, Ethiopic, Mehri (*zemon*, *zubon*), Samaritan, etc., though its etymology remains obscure.'

<sup>3</sup>Ezra 10:14; Neh 10:35; 13:31.

<sup>4</sup>Neh 2:6; Esth 9:27,31.



by Loader (1979:30) when he argues, 'Here there is no talk of *when* things occur - the fact is *that* they occur and that they occur in such a way that man cannot determine what happens to him' [author's emphasis]. 'This,' Loader maintains, 'is a prominent theme right through the book.'

The word חפץ is emphasised in this verse because it is appended to the mini-chiasmus with which the verse opens:

לכל זמן ועת לכל-חפץ

This word adds an extra layer of ambiguity to the verse because, in the same way that זמן and עת may or may not be synonymous, so also לכל and לכל-חפץ may or may not mean the same thing. It depends largely on how the word חפץ is understood. It occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible with the sense of 'pleasure, delight'<sup>5</sup>. But it is also used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to things that God 'wills' or 'intends'<sup>6</sup>, and in later Hebrew it bears the meaning 'matter' or 'affair'. Thus the parallelism could be maintained in two ways: the verse could be rendered either

For everything there is a time and a time for every matter

or,

For everything there is an appointed time and a time for every purposed thing

Or alternatively, חפץ could introduce a new element to the verse:

For everything there is a time and a time for all delights

A study of the other occurrences of words from the root חפץ in Qohelet does little to clarify the matter. In 5:3; 12:1,10 it bears the sense 'take pleasure in'; in 8:3 יחפץ could be translated either 'he pleases' or 'he intends'; in 5:7 החפץ should be rendered 'the matter'; and in 3:17 and 8:6, as here, it is unclear how it should be translated. The word seems to bear dif-

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Job 21:21; Prov 3:15; 8:11.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Isa 44:28; 46:10; 48:14. Isa 46:9,10 also refers to remembering former things (cf Qoh 1:10-11):

זכרו ראשנות מעולם  
כי אנכי אל ואין עוד אלהים ואפס כמוני  
מגיד מראשית אחרית ומקדם אשר לא-נעשו  
אמר עצתי תקום וכל-חפצי אעשה

ferent meanings in the book, and it may be that the author is deliberately playing on these differences.

There does not seem to be any thematic structure to the poem in 3:2-8, nor does there appear to be any development through the poem or any thread linking one pair to the next. The first pair probably serves to establish the boundaries within which all the others take place, but the rest probably represent by their extreme opposites the whole spectrum of human life to illustrate that *everything* people do has its time. It is, therefore, probably futile to try to pin down exactly what each pair refers to, and to attempt to trace some intricate scheme to elucidate a hidden meaning in the passage. It may be, for example, that casting and gathering stones in v.5 means just that, whatever the reason for these actions<sup>7</sup>, and does not indicate hostility or friendship<sup>8</sup>, or the practice of or abstention from sexual intercourse<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, rending and sewing in v.7 may have nothing do to with the Jewish practice of rending garments as a sign of mourning<sup>10</sup>.

This passage is highly ambiguous not because its meaning is unclear. There may well be some uncertainty over how זמן and כּפץ should be interpreted, and whether they imply a measure of planning or even predetermination of the appropriate time for everything, but these are in the introduction to the poem and the poem itself conveys the clear message - there is a time for *everything* that is done under heaven. Where the ambiguity lies is in determining what purpose the passage serves in its immediate context and within the book as a whole. The poem can be interpreted as the work of a great cynic who asserts, as Gordis (1968:229) expresses it, that 'all acts are predetermined and all human activity is therefore useless'. Thus one might agree with Johnson (1982:103) when he writes:

<sup>7</sup>So Fox (1989:192-3).

<sup>8</sup>Barton (1912:100) and Eaton (1983:79-80) see here a reference to the casting of stones on an enemy's field to render it useless in times of war, and the removal of such stones as an act of peace or friendship.

<sup>9</sup>So Chamakkala (1977:124-5); Gordis (1968:230); Loader (1979:30-1); and Ogden (1987:52-3). Loader mentions other interpretations, but for him the deciding factor is whether or not the interpretation fits the scheme he proposes revolving round 'desirable' and 'undesirable' elements in the poem. He states (1979:242), 'to "throw away stones" *must* have a "desirable" meaning unless the whole composition is to be disturbed.' [Our emphasis]

<sup>10</sup>Contra, e.g., Whybray (1989:71) who claims, 'this probably refers to the well-attested custom of tearing one's clothes as a sign of mourning (see, e.g., Gen 37:29; 2 Sam 13:31) and of repairing them when the time of mourning was over (so Midrash Rabba).' By contrast, Crenshaw (1988:96) writes, 'One need not restrict the references to mourning and its cancellation, for the verse may simply note that people engage in sewing and ripping garments from time to time.'



In each of the examples of everyday activities, the point is that our lives are lived in the going back and forth between opposites, and that God has prearranged all of this so that man's freedom is an illusion, except for his choice of how he will respond to life's prearranged appointments. The doctrine of Qoheleth comes perilously close to fatalism.

On the other hand it might be read as an affirmation of the order which God has built into the world he created - such that one can say with the psalmist (Ps 31:15,16a):

But I trust in thee, O Lord,  
I say "Thou are my God."  
My times are in thy hand.

Thus Ogden (1987:51) argues,

Every earthly event (*hepes*) occurs at a determined moment of time. Underlying this introductory statement is the conviction that creation is marked by an orderliness which takes its origin in the divine plan and will ... There is here also an echo of the order and innate goodness of creation as expressed in Genesis 1 ... In stating this principle Qoheleth reveals an up-beat, positive attitude.

In isolation the poem can be read either way, and how it is understood will depend on how it is seen to relate to its context. However, we have already pointed out how ambiguous the end of ch.2 is, and we will see that matters are no more straightforward in the rest of ch.3. For instance, Gordis (1968:228-9) on the one hand, after listing a number of translations, argues,

While any of these interpretations is consistent with vv.1-8, the key to the meaning Koheleth attaches to them is to be found in the verses following (9-15), which represent the conclusions to which he comes. Koheleth begins with noting an accepted datum of experience, that all actions have their proper time (3:1). He then draws two conclusions that go far beyond the practical utility of the observation: a) all acts are predetermined and all human activity is therefore useless. This is stated explicitly in v.9; and b) all events, even those which man regards as calamities, have their place in God's plan (11a). What oppresses Koheleth is that man is given no glimpse of that meaning.

Tidball (1989:44) on the other hand, says, 'Thank God for providence. If we read verses 1-8 through the lens of verses 11-15 this becomes the dominant thought. God presides in love over all the circumstances of our lives.

It seems, then, that in 3:1-8 we have another passage very much like 1:4-11. It purports to be a description of observable fact which in itself is unlikely to raise much objection. However, how one responds to these 'facts' is another matter: some will no doubt find comfort in the fact that things do have their appropriate moments and discern in this the providential care of God, while others will respond with despair to the fact that they have so little control over their own lives and consider that if there is a God behind this state of affairs then he is a somewhat oppressive being.

### 9.1.2 3:9-22

In some respects this passage is quite different to what has gone before, particularly the emphasis in the first half on what God does. However, it also uses phrases strikingly similar, but notably different, to phrases which appeared in chs.1,2, it develops some important themes from those chapters and is every bit as ambiguous. In fact, there is a degree of ambiguity attached to every major theme addressed in these verses.

#### 9.1.2.1 3:9-15

The first verse of the section clearly alludes back to the introduction to the book which concludes with a similar question:

מה-יתרון לאדם	בכל-עמלו	ש-	יעמל תחת השמש	1:3
מה-יתרון העושה	ב-	אשר הוא	עמל	3:9

However, there are a number of differences which should be noted. Firstly, this is the only occasion in Qohelet when the question מה-יתרון/יותר is not followed by the preposition ל-:

מה-יתרון	לאדם	1:3
מה-יתרון	העושה	3:9
מה-יתרון	לו	5:15
מה-יותר	לחכם	6:8
מה-יתר	לאדם	6:11

יתרון/יותר is also followed by ל- in 2:13; 7:11; 10:11<sup>11</sup>:

יש	יתרון	לחכמה	2:13
ויתר		לראי השמש	7:11
ואין	יתרון	לבעל הלשון	10:11

It should be noted that it serves a different purpose in 2:13 where it is omitted from the comparison in the second half of the verse, יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות כיתרון האור מן החשך. The preposition might have been more appropriate in 3:19, where the advantage (or lack of in this instance) might be *to* 'the person', rather than *in* 'wisdom', ומותר האדם מן-הבהמה אין 3:9 (and similarly 3:19) could simply be an alternative way of expressing the same thing, 'what is the worker's advantage', rather than 'what advantage is there to the worker?'. However, it could also be rendered, 'what advantage is the worker?'

The second difference between the two verses is the use in 3:9 of העושה. We noted above that עמל and עשה seem to be used as near-synonyms in Qohelet, and 2:11 provides a

<sup>11</sup>This is not the case in 5:8 and 10:10, which is part of the reason why these verses are so difficult to interpret. The construction in 7:12 is such that the preposition is not needed, and in 2:11 it is simply stated אין יתרון without specifying for whom.



good example when it refers to **כל-מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות**. However, the use of a word from the root **עשה** here introduces an element of ambiguity to the verse because while the end of ch.2 focused on the 'work' (**עמל**) that people do, this section of ch.3 focuses on the 'deeds' (**עשה**) that God does. Indeed, these verses serve as an effective contrast to Qohelet's 'deeds' (**עשה**) described particularly in 2:4-10. Therefore, while **מה-יתרון העושה** might most readily be seen as a synonym for **מה-יתרון לאדם** in 1:3, and be taken to refer to the people who do all the things listed in 3:2-8, it might also allude to God who is most often the subject of the verb **עשה** in the following verses. In this case, the ambiguity created by the omission of the preposition **ל-** following **מה-יתרון** adds a certain irony to the verse if it is read as 'what advantage *is* the worker?', or even 'what advantage is the *maker*?'

The expression **תחת השמש** is also omitted from 3:9. Indeed, in other verses which allude back to chs.1,2 or point forward to later chapters, **תחת השמש** is again left out. If the expression indicates the human sphere, perhaps it occurs less often in this passage because the focus here is so much on what God does.

The other differences between 1:3 and 3:9 seem to make no difference to the sense of the verses. **כל-עמלו** is omitted from 3:9, and **שיעמל** in 1:3 is replaced by **עמל**. **אשר** certainly occurs more often in this passage than it did earlier (vv.10,11,11,14,15,22), but **-ש** is used as well (vv.13,14,15,18,22). There is no obvious reason why one or other is used<sup>12</sup> - but it might be noted that the interchange gives the author more flexibility with the numbers of words in each part of the passage.

3:10 bears a striking resemblance to 1:13 at the beginning of the 'second introduction' to Qohelet, although again the expression **תחת השמים** is omitted:

ענין רע	נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו	כל-אשר נעשה תחת השמים הוא	1:13
את-הענין אשר נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו		ראיתי	3:10

Again **אשר** is used in 3:10 where it did not appear in 1:13, but more important is the observation that it replaces **רע**. The omission of **רע** means that the verse is even more open to different interpretations than 1:13: if 3:2-8 is read negatively the two words from a root **ענה** may be connected with the root signifying affliction; but if 3:2-8 is read in a neutral sense simply as

<sup>12</sup>Cf Isaksson (1987:150-6); Schoors (1992:138-49). Isaksson (1987:149) writes, 'It is a unique feature of the Book of Qoheleth that the particles *'aser* and *se-* are here used seemingly indiscriminately with approximately the same frequency.'



a description of what happens under heaven, or in a positive sense as an affirmation of the ordering of things, 3:10 may be read as quite neutral. Moreover, **את-הכל עשה יפה בעתו** at the start of v.11 might also suggest a less negative reading.

3:11 offers a prime example of the kind of ambiguity in Qohelet which allows for interpretations ranging from extreme pessimism to great optimism about God's relationship with humanity. Crenshaw (1988:91-2,97), for example, argues that although things done according to the divine schedule are 'beautiful', people are totally unable to discern that schedule because God has placed 'the unknown' in their minds. Although Loader's (1986:39-40) understanding of **העלם** is different to Crenshaw's, his reading is just as negative:

God has set the temporal world order in the human center of reflection, that means he forces man to occupy himself, in his mind, with the unceasing succession of the fixed dispensations of fate that come upon him. But there is a problem: of all the things God does, man understands absolutely nothing. From beginning to end there is not a single aspect human beings can comprehend. So to the Preacher the whole situation is absurd. Man cannot escape the torment of his fate, for God has made it a part of his nature to think about it; yet he gains nothing from all his reflections because God's work remains his own mystery.

Ogden (1987:55), on the other hand, argues, 'in addition to observing the order of moments of time, we have also been given, according to Qoheleth, an awareness that there is something which transcends these limits, namely the eternal.' Similarly, Eaton (1983:81) writes,

The 'eternity' in man's heart must be connected with the 'eternity' of v.14 ... The eternity of God's dealings with mankind corresponds to something inside us: we have a capacity for eternal things, are concerned about the future, want to understand 'from the beginning to the end', and have a sense of something which transcends our immediate situation ... This inward 'eternity' has a negative result: *man does not find out the work God has done from the beginning to the end* (cf. NIV). The Preacher's vast researches have found nothing in the finite earthly realm which can satisfy the human heart intellectually or practically. Though he has resolved to understand 'all' that is under the sun (1:13), there is that within him which makes him realise he can never comprehend God's plan in its entirety (*from beginning to end*, NIV). This is the nearest he comes to Augustine's maxim: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.'

There are a number of ambiguities in this verse which elicit the reader's involvement in determining its meaning. The first concerns the verb **עשה** - who is the subject of the verb? It could relate back to **בני האדם** in the previous verse, but it is a singular verb while that expression is plural - although we have already noted a number of cases where the verb does not agree with its subject. It might possibly refer right back to **העושה** in 3:9, but this word is probably too distant to be readily linked with the verb. There are two more probable explanations: either the phrase **את-הכל עשה יפה בעתו** could be seen as a reference back to the poem in 3:2-8, and read, 'all that *one* does is beautiful/appropriate in its time', which would constitute an appropriate response to those earlier verses; or it could be read in line with the rest of the



verse as a description of God's deeds, 'all that *God* does is beautiful/appropriate', or 'God made everything beautiful/appropriate'. In the context of the verse as a whole, and in light of the following verses, the latter option is more likely: God is the subject of the verb עשה in the second half of 3:11 and twice in v.14:

לא-ימצא האדם את-המעשה אשר-עשה האלהים מראש ועד-סוף	v.11c
ידעתי כי כל-אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם	v.14a
והאלהים עשה שיראו מלפניו	v.14c

However, the verb is used of human action in the clause in v.12 ולעשות טוב בחייו. There is also a difference in emphasis between 'all that God does...' and 'God made everything...', the former making a more positive assertion about God's actions in general.

יפה is also ambiguous. It is a common word elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible where it means 'fair, beautiful'<sup>13</sup>. But, as Barton (1912:105) points out, 'in NH it has a much wider meaning,' and could indicate simply appropriateness or 'properness'. This rendering of the word gives a better reading in the only other verse where it occurs in Qohelet, 5:17:

הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב אשר יפה לאכול-ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת-השמש מספר ימי-חיו אשר נתן-לו האלהים כי-הוא חלקו

'Appropriate' certainly gives a less positive reading than does 'beautiful'<sup>14</sup>.

בעתו is generally rendered, without question, 'in *its* time' - implying that things are beautiful or appropriate when they are done at a time that is right for them. However, Crenshaw (1988:97) recognises the ambiguity of the word, 'it is impossible to know whether the pronominal suffix on *bē'itto* refers to the creator or to the abstract idea of time.' Thus it could be read either 'in *its* time' or 'in *his* time'. The latter conveys a much greater sense of God's purposive planning, and would enhance a positive reading of the clause. The former gives a neutral reading of the word in line with the poem in 3:2-8, indicating simply that there is an appropriate time for everything that happens: the clause would then be open to interpretation along the lines that Crenshaw follows, but also to more positive interpretation.

וגם is also ambiguous in this verse. Its usual meaning in Qohelet, where it is used 58 times<sup>15</sup>, is, as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, 'also'. This would seem to imply, as Crenshaw

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Gen 12:14; Deut 21:11; 2 Sam 14:25; Jer 11:16; Ezek 31:9; etc.

<sup>14</sup>Chamakkala (1977:127) argues that the first part of 3:11 is based on Gen 1:31, but Qohelet chose a different word: 'The reason for this choice probably could be that he is not so optimistic as the P writer, and even intended to temper the original source's unbounded optimism: he knows that man's experience here on earth are anything but pleasant!' Cf Crenshaw (1974:29-30).

<sup>15</sup>Schoors (1992:128) writes, 'this particle occurs some 58 times in the book, which is a rather high frequency.' (cf Schoors, 1992:128-34)



(1988:97) concedes, 'that what the deity has placed in the human heart (mind) is good', or at least appropriate. However, as Whybray (1989a:73) notes, '*gam* sometimes means 'yet, however', and if this is the case here the clause which follows must express some kind of qualification of what God has conferred on men according to the preceding clause'<sup>16</sup>. **גם** does seem to be used as an adversative in other places in Qohelet, perhaps including the verses following this one:

3:12,13  
ידעתי כי אין טוב בם כי אם-לשמוח ולעשות טוב בחייו  
וגם כל-האדם שיאכל ושתה וראה טוב בכל-עמלו מתת אלהים היא

It may make a considerable difference in 3:11 whether **גם** is read as 'also'<sup>17</sup> or 'yet, however'<sup>18</sup>.

It is the word **העלם** that has engendered most debate in this verse<sup>19</sup>. The first difficulty is to determine which root it derives from. Some commentators argue that it is from the root 'to conceal', while others contend that it is from the much more common root which indicates a long duration of time in the past or future. Fox (1989:194), however, argues for an emendation of the MT from **עלם** to **עמל** for which there is no evidence except that it is, according to Fox, 'more in line with Qohelet's thought'<sup>20</sup>. If the word is from the first root, it would mean something like 'ignorance'<sup>21</sup> which would fit the context well - but this form of the word does not occur elsewhere. If the word is from the second root its interpretation is more complicated - which in view of other ambiguities in the verse and elsewhere in Qohelet is perhaps an argument in its favour. Whybray (1989a:73-4) points out that **עולם** is used in the Hebrew Bible only to 'denote either past or future duration of time virtually without limit (so "of old" or

<sup>16</sup>BDB (p.169) says, 'connecting two ideas which express (or imply) a contradiction, **גם** acquires sometimes an adversative force.' It then goes on to cite Ps 95:9; 129:2; Jer 6:15=8:12; Exod 20:23; Qoh 4:8,16; 5:18; Neh 6:1; Ezek 16:28; 20:15; Qoh 3:13; 6:7; Neh 5:8. Gordis (1968:222) writes, '**גם** in an adversative sense is an earmark of Koheleth's style.'

<sup>17</sup>As in NEB, REB, RSV, NRSV, NIV.

<sup>18</sup>'But' in NJPS, NJB.

<sup>19</sup>Chamakkala (1977:128) describes it as 'polyvalent'. Crenshaw (1974:40) says,

If we dare to enter this well known playground of fantasy, it is with full knowledge that the meaning of this obscure *ha'olam* 'is far off, and deep, very deep, who can find it out?' (Eccl. 7:24).

<sup>20</sup>Fox (1989:194) argues,

In 8:17, which strongly resembles 3:11 in phraseology, Qohelet uses 'ML to designate man's toiling to apprehend (*limso*) that which God has brought to pass. This is toil of the heart, a mental labor, similar to "heart's pursuit" mentioned in 2:22.

But see, e.g., MacDonald (1899:212) who states that 'there does not seem to be a particle of evidence pointing to a different reading; the versions all support the Massortes,' and goes on to argue that **העלם** fits 'the context perfectly' and moves 'the whole section into a new and clear light'!

<sup>21</sup>Thus, for example, 'ignorance' (Barton, 1912:105; Dahood, 1952:206), 'unknown' (Crenshaw, 1988:91), 'enigma' (1986:23), 'darkness' (Whitley, 1979:33) are all translations based on this root.



"[for]ever"), but in later Hebrew also bears the meaning "the age" or "the world"<sup>22</sup>. Hence, while Ogden (1987:55) argues for the translation 'eternity'<sup>23</sup>, and NRSV and REB translate 'a sense of past and future'<sup>24</sup>, Gordis (1968:232) renders העולם 'the world, love of the world', and Loader (1986:39) 'the temporal world order'. The ambiguity is captured by *τοσ αἰωνος* in LXX.

עולם in 3:11 may be linked to v.14, לעולם היה הוא יעשה האלהים כי כל-אשר ידעתי. But *how* they are connected is not easy to determine. Does it mean that people are given a *sense* of the eternity of God's deeds<sup>25</sup>, or is there a deliberate contrast: what God does endures 'forever' (עולם), but what he gives humankind is 'ignorance' (עולם)? Even if God does give people some sense of eternity, a contrast may still be intended: what God does endures forever, but while people are given a sense of this they cannot understand any of the things that he does<sup>26</sup>. It is not at all clear how this clause in 3:11 relates to its context, either what comes before it, or what follows.

The word מבלי may well play on the preceding word, בלבם by its alliteration. But its role in the verse is also unclear. Its usual meaning in the Hebrew Bible<sup>27</sup> is something along the lines of 'for want of' or 'for lack of' or 'without'. In fact, the translation 'without' would be appropriate in almost every case. This occurrence in Qohelet, the only time it is used in the book, is the only occasion when it is used with אשר. BDB (p.115) suggests that only here is מבלי used as a conjunction, which means 'so that not ...', with לא being pleonastic. Most commentators interpret the verse in line with this suggestion<sup>28</sup>. If the word is translated in this way, some such rendering of העולם as 'ignorance' is practically demanded by the concluding

<sup>22</sup>Cf, e.g., Sir 3:18; 16:7.

<sup>23</sup>NJPS translates 'He also puts eternity in their minds', but offers the explanatory footnote: 'I.e., He preoccupies man with the attempt to discover the times of future events; cf 8:17.'

<sup>24</sup>Cf NJB, 'he has given us an awareness of the passage of time.'

<sup>25</sup>Note that Fox (1989:194) argues,

*L<sup>e</sup>'olam* does not indicate duration, as if Qohelet were asserting the eternity of everything God creates or makes happen; that is a notion both untrue and irrelevant... Rather, it is a sentence modifier placed as an after thought (compare the positioning of *mero's w<sup>e</sup>'ad sop* at the end of the sentence in 3:11). In other words, it is always the case that what happens is only what God has made happen.

<sup>26</sup>Lohfink (1987:239) renders the clause, 'God gives every event *an eternal referent* in its (= event's) heart.' [His emphasis]

<sup>27</sup>מבלי occurs 21 times in the Hebrew Bible: Exod 14:11; Deut 9:28; 28:55; 2 Kgs 1:3; Isa 5:13; Jer 2:15; 9:9,10,11; Ezek 14:15; 34:5; Hos 4:6; Zeph 3:6,6; Job 4:11,20; 6:6; 18:15; 24:7,8; 31:19.

<sup>28</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:98), 'so that he cannot find...'; Crenshaw (1988:91), 'because of which no-one can find out...'; Whitley (1979:33), 'because of which man cannot discover...'. See also RSV, NIV, NEB and REB. Cf Schoors (1992:147-8).

part of the sentence if it is to make sense: 'he puts ignorance in their minds so that people do not find out...'. There is no logical connection between the placing of 'eternity', or 'a sense of the world', or 'a sense of past and future' and human inability to know what God does. Alternatively, מלבי could be rendered more in line with its use everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible as 'without'<sup>29</sup>: 'without which a person cannot find out what God does from beginning to end.' In this case 'ignorance' is inappropriate as a translation for העלם, while something along the lines of 'a sense of eternity', 'a sense of the world', or 'a sense of past and future' would give a coherent reading. However, it is not clear that העלם conveys *a sense of* eternity or the world or the past and future, and the statement that God puts 'eternity' or 'the world' or 'past and future time' in the human heart does not provide a coherent translation<sup>30</sup>.

However the verse is read, there are difficulties to be overcome so that the reader can make sense of it. Either something has dropped out of the verse; or the intended sense of one or more words in the verse has been lost; or one or more words have become corrupt; or the meaning of the verse is deliberately indeterminate so as to force the reader to fill in the gaps.

The *translation* of the last part of 3:11 presents few problems: 'a person cannot find out the deeds that God performs from beginning to end.' But here too there is ambiguity. Firstly, what is it that people cannot find out? The clause could be interpreted either 'a person cannot find out *any* of the things God does from beginning to end', or 'a person cannot find out *all* of the things God does from beginning to end'<sup>31</sup>. Secondly, to what do the terms 'beginning' and 'end' refer? The contrast between 'beginning' and 'end' is drawn three times in Qohelet, but each time different words are used:

לא-ימצא האדם את-המעשה אשר-עשה האלהים מראש ועד-סוף	3:11
טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו	7:8
תחלת דברי-פיהו סכלות ואחרית פיהו הוללות רעה	10:13

Moreover, on the two other occasions that the word סוף is used, it refers to different things: סוף כל-האדם, probably a synonym for death, in 7:2; and סוף דבר in 12:13 the precise implica-

<sup>29</sup>Cf NJPS, 'He also put eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass.'

<sup>30</sup>Thus Whybray (1989:73) argues:

it makes little sense in Hebrew to say that God put (or more probably, puts) either eternity or the world into man's mind, since the Hebrew language hardly allows such an expression to be understood as an ellipsis for 'the *notion* of eternity' (or of the world). [His emphasis]

<sup>31</sup>Compare for example, REB, '...no comprehension of God's work from beginning to end', and NJPS, 'but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass.'



tions of which are uncertain. The word ראש is also used in two other verses in Qohelet, but each time it means 'head' not 'beginning'. ראשית is used in 7:8, where it probably means 'beginning', and considering its use as the first word of Genesis, it would have been an appropriate word to use here if the author intended to convey clearly the beginning of all things, or the beginning of God's work. In light of the extremes represented in each pair in the poem in 3:2-8, it may be that 'from beginning to end' is used in a similar way here to mean *everything* that God does.

While 3:9 is highly reminiscent of 1:3 and 3:10 is very similar to 1:13, 3:12-13 bears a striking resemblance to 2:24 (and to the other verses issuing the 'call to enjoyment'):

	אין-טוב באדם	2:24
כי אם-לשמוח ולעשות טוב בחייו	ידעתי כי אין טוב במ	3:12
טוב ב- עמלו	שיאכל ושתה והראה את-נפשו	2:24
טוב בכל-עמלו	שיאכל ושתה וראה	3:13
	וגם כל-האדם	
	גם-זה ראיתי אני כי מיד האלהים היא	2:24
	מתת אלהים היא	3:13

Precisely the same issues which arose in relation to 2:24 arise again here, except that a new feature appears in 3:12,13 and with it further ambiguity: what does לעשות טוב mean? But before examining this phrase, it should be noted that by replacing באדם with במ another ambiguity is introduced<sup>32</sup>. The plural suffix might suggest that it is the 'beginning' and 'end' mentioned at the end of the previous verse that is referred to, as this would give a grammatically plural subject. Alternatively האדם in the previous verse may stand for 'all people', like כל-האדם in v.13, or relate back to בלבם earlier in v.11 and לבני האדם in v.10, and be represented by a plural pronominal suffix - but בחייו, which probably refers to האדם, takes a singular suffix<sup>33</sup>. Or it might even be that את-המעשה אשר-עשה האלהים in the previous verse is synonymous with כל-אשר יעשה האלהים in v.14 and could be represented by the plural suffix. This means that אין טוב במ could indicate that there is nothing good in humankind, or that there is nothing good in what God does, or that there is nothing good between the beginning and the end.

The expression לעשות טוב could mean either 'to do good', in an ethical sense, or 'to make wealth', or possibly 'to find enjoyment'. טוב, as it is used elsewhere in the Hebrew

<sup>32</sup>BHS suggests emending במ to באדם in line with 2:24.

<sup>33</sup>But a plural noun may be followed by a singular suffix indicating *each* of a number of things or people. Such could be the case here.

Bible, does not usually have an ethical force, but does bear this sense on a number of occasions<sup>34</sup>. However, the vast majority of commentators find no ethical element in this part of the verse, rather they prefer the sentiments of the RSV translation, 'be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live'<sup>35</sup>. But, contrary to Barton's assertion (1912:102) that 'wherever the phrase occurs in Qoh ... it is defined by the context to mean "enjoy life"', the context in 7:20 **כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא**, seems to demand an ethical understanding. However the word is interpreted, there is a certain irony in the position of the statements **כי אם לשמוח טוב ולעשות טוב בחייו** and **אין טוב במ**. In this verse and in the phrase **ראה טוב בכל-עמלו** in v.13, the author is playing on different senses of the word **טוב**, and creating uncertainty about how it should be interpreted.

If vv.12-13, introduced by **ידעתי כי**, describes what human beings do, there is a sharp contrast drawn in v.14, also introduced by **ידעתי כי**, which describes God's deeds. This might mean that there is an alternation between description of human deeds in vv.9,10 and vv.12,13, and of God's deeds in v.11 and vv.14,15. There is also an alternation between use of **אלהים** without the definite article, in the verses dealing with human deeds (once each in vv.10,13), and **האלהים** in those relating to God's deeds (**האלהים** in vv.11,14 and **והאלהים** in v.14,15). The verb **עשה** is used probably four times of God's activities - twice in each of v.11 and v.14, while it is use once probably of human activity in v.12:

את-הכל עשה	v.11a
את-המעשה אשר-עשה האלהים	v.11b
ולעשות טוב בחייו	v.12
כל-אשר יעשה האלהים	v.14a
והאלהים עשה	v.14b

On each occasion the use is slightly different.

The object of the verb **עשה** in v.14b is unclear. The verb could either pick up on what has gone before, 'God does *it*', or the object may be introduced by **-ש**, 'God does *that which...*' or 'God makes *those who...*'. In the first case, **אשר** should be read in its rarer purposive sense meaning 'so that'<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>34</sup>E.g., 1 Sam 19:4; 1 Kgs 8:36; Isa 65:2; Jer 6:16; Ezek 18:18; Mic 6:8; 7:4; Ps 36:5; Prov 12:2; 13:22; 14:14; 15:3; 2 Chr 6:27.

<sup>35</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:102); Crenshaw (1988:98-9); Fox (1989:191); Gordis (1968:232); Whybray (1989:74).

<sup>36</sup>See Ges<sup>K</sup> 165b. He cites Deut 4:10,40; 6:3; 32:46; Jos 3:7; Neh 8:14,15; and negatively (with **לא**) Gen 11:7; 24:3; 1 Kgs 22:16.



רא' in v.14b may be from one of two roots. Apart from the *dagesh* in the *yodh* it would seem to be the third person masculine plural imperfect of the verb ראה, 'they see'. Thus Ogden (1987:57) argues,

In view of the fact that the opening verb of this pericope is *ra'a*, and since Qoheleth is discussing what humanity can or cannot discover of the divine activity, it is entirely reasonable that an interpretation which accords with this wider context be adopted. Thus: 'God has done (this) so that they might see (what proceeds) from him'. On this reading, *mill<sup>e</sup>panaw* relates to 'him' as the source of all action, and it dovetails with the unit's overall stress upon the deeds of the deity.

However, the *dagesh* is usually taken to indicate that the pronominal *yodh* has replaced the *yodh* of the third person masculine plural imperfect of the verb רא' <sup>37</sup> so that the phrase here is equivalent to the phrase in 8:12, אשר יראו מלפניו. Of course, neither the ambiguity, nor the fact that the phrase here and in 8:12 are different should now be a surprise. But even if the verb is read as רא', a further difficulty remains: what does 'fear' indicate? Crenshaw (1988:99-100) argues,

In many contexts within Proverbs, fear before the deity is presented as the correct attitude of a religious person, translatable by something like "to be religious". Qoheleth's concept differs greatly, for in a few instances fear of God comes very close to terror before an unpredictable despot <sup>38</sup>.

Elsewhere Crenshaw (1984:82) writes that 'fear' takes on a 'wholly new meaning' in Qoheleth <sup>39</sup>. However, Whybray (1989a:75) argues,

the idea that Qoheleth's concept of the 'fear of God' is essentially different from its usual meaning in the Old Testament (devotion to God, worship of God, or willing obedience to his commandments) is an idea derived from a particular interpretation of Qoheleth's thought in general rather than from his actual use of the phrase.

He concludes, 'His meaning is that God rightly demands "fear" from men in the sense of recognition of his essential difference from his creatures' <sup>40</sup>. רא' is used a further eight times in Qoheleth, and only in 9:2 and 12:5, which do not refer to God, does it seem to demand the sense of being afraid of something. Elsewhere (5:6; 7:18; 8:12,12,13; 12:13) the notion of reverence of God seems appropriate though the idea of being afraid need not necessarily be excluded - except perhaps in 8:12-13 where the one who fears God is cast as the opposite of

<sup>37</sup>Cf, e.g., Gen 42:35; Exod 14:31; Deut 17:13; Josh 4:14; 1 Sam 4:7; 1 Kgs 3:28; Ps 40:4; Neh 6:16; etc.

<sup>38</sup>Other commentators who adopt a similar view of the meaning of רא' in this context include Barton (1912:102); Davidson (1986:24); Loader (1986:41).

<sup>39</sup>Cf Crenshaw (1974:44-5) where he describes it as 'cold terror.' See also Murphy (1993:134).

<sup>40</sup>Elsewhere Whybray (1978:201) writes, 'The evidence suggests that for Qoheleth the designation 'he who fears God' is the highest accolade of moral virtue that can be bestowed.' Eaton (1983:82) agrees with Whybray when he writes that this "fear" is 'not a craven terror in the face of the monstrous or the unknown, but rather the opposite, reverence and awesome regard for God.' Lohfink (1987:239) writes, 'the "fear of God" is the greatest human possibility.'

the wicked one, הרשע, which implies that fear of God has an ethical value. Again, each time fear of God is mentioned it is in a slightly different form:

	יראו מלפניו	ש-	3:14
	את-האלהים ירא	כי	5:6
אלהים	ירא	כי-	7:18
האלהים	יראי	ל-	8:12
	ייראו מלפניו	אשר	8:12
אלהים	ירא מלפני	איננו	8:13
	את-האלהים ירא		12:13

The end of v.15 is obscure<sup>41</sup>. There are two problems. Firstly, the object marker is used without the definite article - this is not without precedent in the Hebrew Bible<sup>42</sup>, or indeed in Qohelet itself (see 4:4; 7:7,14; 8:9; 9:1; 12:14<sup>43</sup>), but it adds uncertainty to the verse nonetheless. Secondly, it is unclear what נרדף refers to. Although the root נרדף is common in the Hebrew Bible, the niphal occurs elsewhere only in a rather obscure phrase in Lam 5:5 where it could mean either 'pursued' or 'persecuted'. נרדף in Qoh 3:15 seems, then, to indicate that which or those who are pursued or persecuted, but this appears to bear no connection with the rest of the verse. Many commentators<sup>44</sup> interpret this to mean that God seeks what has been 'chased away', i.e. that which is past, so that events which happened in the past will happen again. This ties in with the earlier part of the verse and also with 1:9,10, but is a rather forced reading. Perhaps we should conclude with Whybray (1989a:75-6),

The meaning of the last part of the verse (from and God) is obscure ... It must be admitted that the absence of any direct indication of what it is that is 'driven away' makes the intention of this clause quite uncertain.

### 9.1.2.2 3:16-22

The alternation in 3:9-15 between focus on God and focus on people continues to some extent in vv.16-22. In v.16 the author turns back to consider again the human sphere when the verse opens with the words, ועוד ראיתי תחת השמש. The contrast is drawn in v.17 where it is affirmed that God will judge both the righteous and the wicked. Then the rest of the chapter returns to consideration of humanity - specifically human death compared to the death of beasts. As ידעתי כי in v.12 seems to introduce what the author knows about human deeds and

<sup>41</sup>Ben Sira 5:3 is generally regarded as a quote from Qoh 3:15b. Salters (1978:419-20) discusses the connection between the two passages. Whitley (1982:345) argues for the priority of Ben Sira.

<sup>42</sup>E.g., Isa 41:7; 50:4; Job 13:25; Prov 13:21. Cf Ges<sup>K</sup> 116:1,2.

<sup>43</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:164-5).

<sup>44</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:107); Crenshaw (1988:100); Gordis (1968:156).



in v.14 what (s)he knows about God's deeds, so here **אמרתי אני בלבי** in v.17 introduces what the author has to say about God, and in v.18 what (s)he has to say about humanity.

We noted above the emphasis on **הרשע** by its unexpected use at the end of v.16 which places it in the middle of a chiasmus portraying the degeneration 'under the sun' of justice into wickedness, justice then being reinstated by God. The second half of this chiasmus, 3:17, seems to many commentators a surprisingly positive affirmation - so much so that some argue either that it is a gloss<sup>45</sup>, or a viewpoint which the author presents disparagingly<sup>46</sup>, or they emend it in some way to blunt its force<sup>47</sup>. Its sentiments are similar to 12:14, the final verse of the book, which most commentators regard as part of the epilogue(s) added by an editor, **את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע**. However, the same sentiments are expressed before the epilogue in 11:9, **ודע כי על-כל-אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט**. Typical of Qohelet, we have here the same idea portrayed in three different ways, and using different terms: the only common elements are the emphasis on 'all', use of the root **שפט**, and reference to God. Perhaps the most pressing question in each case is 'where and when does this judgment take place?'. Gordis (1968:235) argues that in 3:17, 'שם' is a reference to the other world, the period after death as in Job 1:21; 3:17,19,' but Whybray (1989a:77) says, 'It is extremely unlikely that Qoheleth is here referring to a judgment of the individual after death, a very rare and late concept in the Old Testament and one to which, as other passages make clear, he does not subscribe'<sup>48</sup>. In fact here and elsewhere in Qohelet this issue is left tantalisingly unclear. Fox (1989:197) is adamant that there is no allusion here to an afterlife:

It is hardly an allusion, facetious or otherwise, to an afterlife (as Gordis holds), for Qoheleth does not have enough of a belief in judgment after death to say, even ironically, that justice will come in the after-life, *and if he did believe that, his problem would be solved*. [Our emphasis]

But the question seems rather to be left open, and it may be that the possibility of an afterlife is one of the factors that Qohelet considers as having a bearing on the things he observes 'under the sun' - although (s)he certainly does not present it as firm conclusion and indeed implicitly questions it on a few occasions. This may be a link with the following verses which directly address the issue of death.

<sup>45</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:108); Crenshaw (1974:35; 1988:102).

<sup>46</sup>E.g., Davidson (1986:26); Gordis (1968:235).

<sup>47</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:197).

<sup>48</sup>On **שם** and **שמה** cf Schoors (1992:100-2).

שם may refer back to שמה in v.16, but the different and very unusual form of the word there serves to cast some doubt on this. Of course, if this is the case, and the verses certainly could be read this way, v.17b, כי-עת לכל-חפץ ועל כל-המעשה שם, might imply that there is a time also for evil there. Depending on how חפץ is read here and in 3:1, such a reading would fit well with 3:1-8 - there is a time for *everything* under heaven. It might also tie in with 7:14,17, depending on how these verses are interpreted:

ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה גם את-זה לעמת-זה עשה האלהים	7:14
אל-תרשע הרבה ואל-תהי סכל למה תמות בלא עתך	7:17

Crenshaw (1988:102) suggests that שם 'may be understood with reference to divine times or even locally (there with God).' In this case, it might be in contrast to what happens 'under the sun' and to the evil that happens there (שמה):

ראיתי תחת השמש  
 המשפט  
 הרשע  
 הצדק  
 הרשע  
 הצדק  
 הרשע  
 ישפט  
 האלהים ... שם

This ties in with the contrast in these two verses and throughout 3:9-22 between what God does and what people do. There may also be a contrast with 5:7 which refers to justice and right (perhaps in a legal rather than ethical sense) being denied, and the word חפץ is also used in 5:7, אם-עשק רש וגזל משפט וצדק תראה במדינה אל-תתמה על החפץ. The words חפץ, עת and משפט occur together in 8:5,6, but the meaning of these verses is far from clear and will be discussed later.

כל-חפץ and המעשה are ambiguous in 3:17. כי-עת לכל-חפץ certainly recalls 3:1 where it referred to things done 'under heaven'. However, it might here refer specifically to things planned by God, or again it could mean simply 'all things', or, less probably, 'all pleasures'. המעשה is ambiguous because it could either refer to God's deeds - in contrast perhaps to the human deeds described in v.16 and specifically mentioned in v.22; or it could indicate that there is a time for all human deeds, including evil ones; or, in light of the preposition על- which precedes it, it might indicate that there is a time for God's judgement upon all human deeds.



The main areas of ambiguity in 3:17-22 come near the start and the end, vv.18,21 both being decidedly difficult and producing considerable disagreement among commentators. The first issue concerns the verb לברם<sup>49</sup>, which appears to be the infinitive form of the verb ברר, 'purify, select', with the third person masculine plural pronominal suffix. However, this would mean that there is no finite verb in the verse apart from the opening אמרתי which cannot be the finite verb governing the infinitive לברם, firstly because it would make no sense<sup>50</sup>, and secondly because האלהים would then have no role in the sentence. האלהים seems to be the subject of this verb, and the pronominal ending the object. The problem would be resolved if the next verb, ראה, were a finite verb when this part of this verse might be rendered, 'God, to purify them, showed them that they are beasts' - but it too is in the infinitive form. As the verse stands, there appears to be a finite verb omitted which would make sense of the two infinitives ולראות ... ולברם in the way that נתתי את-לבי at the beginning of 1:13 governs the two infinitives in that verse, ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור.

An alternative, which a number of commentators support<sup>51</sup>, is to view the *lamedh* as an emphatic prefix to a finite verb. This makes good sense of the phrase, which might then be rendered 'God *indeed* selects them...', but there is no wholly convincing parallel in the Hebrew Bible. The *lamedh* prefixed to the noun כלב in Qoh 9:4 appears to serve the same purpose, and would be the closest example<sup>52</sup>. However, the *waw* before לראות in 3:18 seems more appropriate if this is a second infinitive governed by one finite verb than if it is governed by a finite form of ברר, although, as Ges<sup>K</sup> (114p) indicates, 'In a number of instances - especially in the later books - the infin. constr. with ל appears to be attached by *Waw*..., as the continuation of a previous finite verb.'

ברר in the Hebrew Bible usually bears the meaning 'purify', but in Chr. and Neh. it has the sense of 'choose, select'. The latter seems to be the meaning it bears in later Hebrew, and something derived from this seems probable here. BDB (p.141), following Targ. and

<sup>49</sup>Irwin (1939:298-9) says, 'This word is central in the meaning of the entire verse; and until we have attained some better solution of its enigma than at present, the rest must stand in abeyance.'

<sup>50</sup>Whitley (1979:37) suggests that the infinitive ולראות may be construed with אמרתי thus: 'I considered in my heart concerning the sons of men ... and saw that they are beasts.' He then concludes that לברם האלהים would then be in the nature of a parenthesis, and may not even be original.'

<sup>51</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:103); Gordis (1968:236); Whitley (1979:37). See Schoors (1992:111-4) on the emphatic *lamedh*.

<sup>52</sup>Others might include ליהוה in Ps 89:19; לריח in Cant 1:3. Both Gordis (1968:236) and Whybray (1979:37) point out that the use of such emphatic prepositions is more common in other semitic languages.

Vul., renders the word here as 'test' or 'prove', but there does not appear to be good evidence from Hebrew texts that it can bear this sense.

ולראות is pointed as a qal infinitive, 'to see'. Most commentators<sup>53</sup> contend that this does not make sense - what purpose could God have in 'seeing that they are beasts'? It is usually emended to, or read as, the hiphil. In the vast majority of cases the *he* is retained in the hiphil infinitive when a *lamedh* is prefixed, but occasionally the *he* is omitted<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, an example of this occurs in Qoh 5:5, אל-תתן את-קִיךָ לַחֲטִיָּא אֶת-בִּשְׂרֶךָ. In 5:5 the hiphil is indicated by the *pathah* under the *lamedh*, which does not appear in 3:18, but it is argued that only the slightest emendation is required in the pointing of one letter to render it a hiphil. Whybray (1989a:78), however, argues, 'this meaning, in view of the general laxity of Qohelth's syntax, can probably be obtained without emendation: "so that they may see".' Moreover, this purposive sense seems to be achieved in, for example, 2 Sam 12:10 by the use of the *lamedh* and the infinitive construct, וַנִּתֵּן אֶת-אִשְׁרֵי אֹרִיָּה הַחִתִּי לֵהָיוֹת לָם לְאִשָּׁה, 'you have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be [i.e. that she may be] your wife'<sup>55</sup>. There are a number of ways in which לראות may be read so that it makes sense in its context, but ultimately it should probably be conceded with Whitley (1979:37) that 'in view of the uncertainty attaching to לברם the syntax of ולראות is doubtful.'

The uncertainty in this verse continues with the final two words, הֵמָּה לָהֶם, 'they to them(selves)', or 'they for them(selves)'. Because of the difficulty in making sense of these words, and because הֵמָּה repeats the last three letters of בְּהֵמָה, many commentators see הֵמָּה as the result of dittography and omit it<sup>56</sup>. If לָהֶם is retained, the *lamedh* is usually seen as emphatic giving a reading something like, 'indeed they are'. However, הֵמָּה could also be used in this way, in which case the phrase could be rendered, 'they are *indeed* beasts to them', and if this verse refers back to v.16, 'beasts' may be a metaphor to indicate the level to which people have lowered themselves because of their lack of human virtues. The irony of the following verses would then be that they are actually much like the beasts in other ways over

<sup>53</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:112); Crenshaw (1988:101); Fox (1989:198); Ogden (1987:60).

<sup>54</sup>Cf Ges<sup>K</sup> (53q). Other examples he cites include לִסְתֵּר in Isa 29:15; לִנְפֹל in Num 5:22; לַעֲבִיר in 2 Sam 19:19; לִהְלֶק in Jer 37:12.

<sup>55</sup>Cf Ges<sup>K</sup> (114g). He also cites Gen 11:5; 28:4; Jer 38:26 as further examples of ל + inf. used in this way. This argument is followed by Eaton (1983:86).

<sup>56</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:112); Crenshaw (1988:103); Fox (1989:198); Irwin (1939:299); Ogden (1987:60).



which they have no control. But this reading does not tie in well with the following verse which, because it starts with כִּי, may offer an explanation of v.17 (although this does not always follow elsewhere in the book).

Alternatively the phrase might be rendered 'they of themselves are beasts', perhaps implying that there is nothing people can do *themselves* that distinguishes them from the beasts. This might either be read very negatively to indicate that people are no better off than beasts, or it might be taken to suggest that someone outside themselves, i.e. God, makes the difference. A similar position could be obtained following Gordis's argument (1968:237), based on the interchange in meaning and usage in Qohelet and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible of *beth* and *lamedh*, that we should read לָהֶם as 'in themselves'<sup>57</sup>.

Read in isolation, 3:21 might be translated:

Who knows the spirit/breath<sup>58</sup> of people, the ascending one - it goes upwards; and the spirit/breath of the beast, the descending one - it goes down to the earth?

This might be interpreted, 'Who knows the spirit of people, which rises upwards, or the spirit of the beasts which descends downwards to the earth?'<sup>59</sup>. But precisely what this might mean in the context is difficult to determine, and most commentators<sup>60</sup> follow LXX, Pesh., Vul. and Targ. and render the verse, 'Who knows *whether* the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes downwards.' Usually this is achieved by emending the pointing of the *he* in הָעֶלָּה and הֵיִרְדָּתָהּ to render it as the interrogative particle rather than the definite article. As Whybray explains, 'Many commentators believe that the pointing in the unemended text is the deliberate work of later scribes who were incensed at Qoheleth's refusal to distinguish between the fates of men and animals.' However, Barton (1912:113) and Gordis (1968:238) cite other examples of the interrogative in the Hebrew Bible where a *kamets* is used before gutturals (though none with *ayin* are given), and the *he* is vocalized with full vowels and a *dagesh*<sup>61</sup>. These examples are rare exceptions, but it may be that the author, being aware of such exceptions, could have intended ambiguity here, particularly in light of the theme of one-ness in the preceding verses. However, there are other difficulties with this position.

<sup>57</sup>Gordis (1968:237) cites Qoh 2:24, אֵין טוֹב בָּאָדָם, 3:12, אֵין טוֹב בָּם and Isa 5:4, וְלֹא עָשִׂיתִי בּוֹ. Whybray (1989:87-8) appears to support this argument.

<sup>58</sup>Note that רוּחַ in v.19 appears to be masculine, but here seems to be feminine. Cf Schoors (1992:70).

<sup>59</sup>See, e.g., the reading suggested in the margin of the NIV. Also Eaton (1983:87-9).

<sup>60</sup>E.g. Barton (1912:112-3); Crenshaw (1988:104); Fox (1989:196); Gordis (1968:238); Ogden (1987:62); Schoors (1992:213-4); Whybray (1989:80).

<sup>61</sup>הָאֶחָד in Gen 19:9; הֵיִיטָב in Lev 10:19; הָאִישׁ in Num 16:22; הַבָּאִים in Isa 27:6; הַבָּרֶב in Job 23:6.

On the basis of the use in the Hebrew Bible of similar phrases<sup>62</sup>, we would expect the interrogative particle to be positioned earlier in the verse, **מי יודע הרוח בני האדם עלה**. Moreover, this is how the similar type of question in 2:19 is framed, **ומי יודע החכם יהיה או סכל**. There seems to be no biblical precedent for the type of construction here if we are to understand these two occurrences of *he* as interrogative. Of course, the author may have employed an unusual or even unprecedented grammatical construction to convey a particular point, further emphasised by **למעלה** and **למטה**, 'Who knows the spirit of man *whether it ascends upwards* and the spirit of the beast *whether it descends downwards* to the earth.' However, the unnecessary use of **למעלה** and **למטה** makes good sense if they emphasise a difference between humankind and the beasts in face of the similarities that have been drawn between them in the previous verses.

No matter how the verse is interpreted, there is neither a clear denial of some difference in ultimate destiny of humans and beasts<sup>63</sup>, nor an unambiguous assertion of any kind of afterlife for humanity - perhaps what comes across most clearly in this verse at least is the author's agnosticism in this regard.

This does not necessarily mean that v.21 contradicts the earlier verses. V.19 need not be as unorthodox as some commentators maintain<sup>64</sup>: it is an observable fact that 'under the sun' humans die like beasts - in this respect, at least, their fate is one; also, it is quite orthodox to maintain that 'one' spirit/breath is given to all, for the spirit/breath of life is given by God and taken by him at death<sup>65</sup>; and finally, even if the spirit/breath of humans does go up (back to God?) and the spirit/breath of beasts does go down to the earth, it seems undeniable that the bodies of humans and beasts both return to the same place - the dust from which they came<sup>66</sup>. This accords with 12:7, **וישב העפר על-הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל-האלהים אשר נתנה**. There are no firm grounds on which this assertion can be made, whatever precisely it implies, if we understand 3:21 in the way it is usually translated - although it should be noted that such tensions are not without precedent in Qohelet.

<sup>62</sup>Cf Gen 8:8; 24:21,23; 37:32; etc.

<sup>63</sup>But Crenshaw (1974:40) says, 'How far Qoheleth is from a belief in man's innate endowment of eternity can be seen in his almost flippant rhetorical question dismissing the new idea of resurrection.'

<sup>64</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:104); Gordis (1968:238); Loader (1986:44).

<sup>65</sup>But in Gen ch.2 it is only **אדם** to whom the breath of life is given.

<sup>66</sup>Cf Gen 2:7,19 - human and beast are formed from the ground although only the human being is described as being created from the *dust* of the ground. In Gen 3:19, Adam is told he will return to the ground from which he was taken because, **עפר אתה ואל-עפר תשוב**. Cf Pss 104:29; 146:4; Job 10:9; 34:15.



There are a remarkable number of repeated words in v.19: of the twenty-five words in the verse, seventeen are repeated - **כי**, **הבהמה**, **האדם**, **אחד**, **מות**, **זה** and **כל** all occur twice, and **מקרה** is used three times. This serves to greatly emphasise the fact that death is the one fate which befalls all creatures - both human and beast. By contrast, the use of **מותר** is striking because it is different to the usual form used in Qohelet. This is the only time the word is used, but there seems to be no difference in meaning to **יתרון** or **יותר**. The position of the particle of negation, **אין**, is also striking and also distinguishes it from similar phrases elsewhere:

ומותר האדם מן-הבהמה אין 3:19

ואין יתרון תחת השמש 2:11

ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון 10:11

Holding this word to the end of the clause serves to give it much greater force. The statement commences in a way which may give comfort to the reader, 'advantage for the human over the beasts', then proceeds to shatter any hope that may have arisen with the concluding, 'there is none!'. This makes for a particularly forceful centre to the structure of this passage.

The first section of v.22 is part of the thread of 'call to enjoyment' verses, but it ties in particularly closely with 3:12:

ידעתי כי אין טוב במ 3:12

ולעשות טוב בחייו 3:22

כי אם לשמוח מאשר ישמח האדם במעשיו

וראיתי כי אין טוב

Again the differences between the verses should be noted. The verbs with which each starts are interesting because both also form the basis of questions in this passage. After two statements starting **כי ידעתי** in vv.12,14, we find a question in v.21 starting **מי יודע**. After three accounts of what Qohelet has seen, all using the verb **ראיתי** (vv.10,16,22), the passage closes with the question, **מי יביאנו לראות במה שיהיה אחריו**. What can and cannot be known is important in Qohelet, as is what can be observed, and what it is beyond human ability to perceive.

**כי** occurs as the second word in both 3:12,22, and in both verses the word is used with different meanings. In v.12 the first **כי** might be rendered 'that', while the second is part of the expression **כי אם**, 'except'. In v.13 the first might also be rendered 'that', while the second and third are probably better translated as 'for' or 'because'<sup>67</sup>.

**אין טוב** features in all the verses in the 'call to enjoyment' thread apart from 5:17, but 3:22 is the only occasion it occurs with the comparative *mem*. This means that there is a

<sup>67</sup>On the use of **כי** in Qohelet, see Schoors (1992:103-10).

development from 'there is nothing good in the person' in 2:24, to 'there is nothing good in the person *except*' in 3:12 to 'there is nothing *better* than' here.

ישמח האדם במעשיו at the end of 3:12 is reduced in v.22 to יראיתי כי אין טוב מאשר ישמח האדם במעשיו כי-הוא חלקו. However, if the phrase כי-הוא חלקו is included as part of the 'call to enjoyment' (and it occurs again in 5:17), the two are actually of identical length:

ידעתי כי אין טוב במ כי אם לשמוח ולעשות טוב בחייו	3:12
וראיתי כי אין טוב מאשר ישמח האדם במעשיו כי-הוא חלקו	3:22

Both may be broken down into three parts of comparable length, in which case it is the final part where the biggest difference between the verses lies:

ידעתי כי אין טוב במ	3:12a
וראיתי כי אין טוב מאשר	3:22a
כי אם לשמוח	3:12b
ישמח האדם במעשיו	3:22b
ולעשות טוב בחייו	3:12c
כי-הוא חלקו	3:22c

We discussed the ambiguity of וזה-היה חלקי in 2:10, which is also in the context of enjoying what one does, לא-מנעתי את-לבי מכל-שמחה כי-לבי שמח מכל-עמלי וזה-היה חלקי מכל-עמלי, and similar sentiments are expressed in 5:17,18 and 9:9. A different perspective is found in 2:21, which implies that a person may have to leave his/her חלק to someone undeserving when (s)he dies. 9:5,6 states that there is no חלק after death.

The question which has aroused most debate in the last part of the verse concerns the word אחריו. It could be rendered either 'after *him*', 'after *it*', or possibly 'afterwards'<sup>68</sup>. In the first case, the verse could be interpreted along the lines of 2:21, 'who can bring him to see what will happen to his portion after he has gone,' or more generally, 'who can bring him to see what will happen after he has gone'<sup>69</sup>. In 6:12, מה-יהיה אחריו תחת השמש, what happens is specifically described as 'under the sun', which would support this reading of 3:22. The same could apply in 7:14 and 10:14, and in the second case, 'it' might refer to death which was the focus earlier in the chapter. In 9:3 אחריו specifically relates to death,

<sup>68</sup>Fox (1989:199) contends that, 'it is best to understand *aharayw* as having the lexical meaning of "afterwards", although in the present context the word is specifically applied to the time after death. Elsewhere the reference is to the future more generally.' Gordis (1968:239) agrees, maintaining that it should 'be taken as an adverb with a petrified suffix.' However, Whybray (1989:142) warns that 'the grammatical explanations which have been offered ... are [not] entirely satisfactory.' Cf Schoors (1992:118-9).

<sup>69</sup>See, e.g., Eaton (1983:89); Ogden (1987:63).



והוללות בלבבם בחייהם ואחריו אל-המתים. However, in each verse the translation 'afterwards' is appropriate in which case what it comes after is to be determined from the context.

## 9.2 Conclusions

Ch.3 is key passage in terms of Qohelet's theology. More is said about God in these verses than anywhere else in the book. But what kind of God is pictured here? Does he act in arbitrary ways which are quite beyond human comprehension, or are his actions characterised by certain patterns that people can perceive? Is he a God who burdens people with affliction; or does he keep them busy with the occupation he gives them? Is he a God who makes everything appropriate at the time he determines, but prevents people from discerning that time; or does he make all things beautiful and give people some sense of eternity while not revealing *all* of his (eternal) works? Are his works endless, unchangeable, and unknowable, striking terror into human hearts; or do his deeds draw people to worship a constant and eternal God? Is a stark contrast drawn between observable reality and the tradition that God brings about justice; or is God portrayed as one who can be depended on eventually to see justice done and to seek out those things that seem to have gone unpunished or unrewarded? Is death the end, when human life, like that of the beast, is extinguished forever; or is there a hint of something else, perhaps some kind of return to God? In each instance the hopeful can find hope, but there is also grist for the sceptic's mill.

## CHAPTER 10, What is Good/Better for People

### 10.1 Commentary

#### 10.1.1 4:1-3

4:1-3 is the first part of a section extending to 5:6 whose primary focus is 'what is good/better for people'. There are a number of ambiguous or anomalous features of this passage which should be noted.

עשק is an excellent example of the use of the same word with different nuances, because it seems that the word העשקים is used to mean two rather different things, and a word pointed differently (with a pronominal suffix), עשקיהם, is used to convey the opposite. All three words are pointed as participial forms: the first two are plural forms of the passive participle<sup>1</sup>, while the third is a plural form of the active participle<sup>2</sup>. However, for the first to make sense in its context, את-כל-העשקים אשר נעשים, it should be read as the abstract noun 'oppression', as in Amos 3:9 and Job 35:9<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the second occurrence in its context, והנה דמעת העשקים ואין להם מנחם, should be read as a reference to those subjected to oppression, that is 'the oppressed'. As an active participle the third occurrence, עשקיהם, indicates those who practise oppression, that is 'the oppressors', and the pronominal suffix 'their' presumably refers back to 'the oppressed' mentioned earlier. Thus the notion of oppression is comprehensively covered with references to oppression in general, to those who suffer such oppression and to those responsible for oppression.

That 'there is no comfort for them' is emphasised by using twice exactly the same phrase, ואין להם מנחם. It is unusual in Qohelet to have a clause repeated exactly, and this serves to draw particular attention to it. It may also remind the reader of the repeated phrase in 3:16, שמה הרשע, which we noted above places a particular stress on the second and unexpected occurrence of הרשע. The second phrase in 4:1 is also unexpected because the closest antecedent for להם is עשקים - 'their oppressors'. For this reason, Barton (1912:116) follows Haupt who 'takes [מנחם] the first time as "comforter", and the second as "avenger".' Barton continues, 'In that case the last clause should be rendered, "there was no avenger (for

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Deut 28:29,33; Jer 50:33; Hos 5:11; Pss 103:6; 146:7; Prov 28:17.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Jer 21:12; Pss 72:4; 119:121; Prov 14:31; 22:16; 28:3.

<sup>3</sup>Cf Isa 33:15; Prov 28:16.



the wrongs done, by them)" - a view which is probably correct.' However, there is no evidence that the word can be read in this way, the antecedent of the pronominal suffix on the word עשקיהם (i.e. העשקים) *could* also be the antecedent here, and the ambiguity is quite in keeping with the rest of Qohelet. It is also possible that there is an ironic twist in the verse: 'See the tears of the oppressed - there is no comfort for them; power lies in the hand of their oppressors - but there is no comfort for *them* either.'

It may be that this is an example of what the author observed in 3:16 - there is certainly a similarity in the structure of the two verses which might offer literary support for such a connection:

ועוד	ראיתי	תחת השמש	3:16
ושבתי אני	ואראה את-כל-העשקים אשר נעשים	תחת השמש	4:1

מקום המשפט שמה הרשע	ומקום הצדק שמה הרשע	3:16
והנה דמעת העשקים	ואין להם מנהם ומיד עשקיהם	4:1
	כח ואין להם מנהם	

The statement with which v.2 commences is surprising, even shocking. The first word, ושבח, could come from one of two roots one meaning 'soothe, still'<sup>4</sup>, and the other 'laud, praise'<sup>5</sup>. Neither seems particularly appropriate in the context, but some word connected to the second root seems more likely - unless the author is deliberately playing on both roots. The irony here is that elsewhere the second root is always used of God, and of the three occurrences of the first root two describe something that God does. The verb is used again only in 8:15, which, besides using a different form of the verb, constitutes quite a contrast to 4:2, ושבחתי אני את-השמחה.

The verse would have made perfect sense if it had continued, את-המתים מן-החיים..., but the addition of שכבר מתו and אשר חיים עדנה emphasises the 'dead-ness' of the dead and the 'alive-ness' of the living, and hence teases out the maximum effect from this striking statement. The latter also serves as a contrast to אשר-עדן לא היה in the next verse: עדנה in 4:2 seems to be a combination, unique in the Hebrew Bible to Qohelet, of עד and הנה; and עדן

<sup>4</sup>Pss 65:8; 89:10; Prov 29:11. Prov 29:11 expresses sentiments found in Qohelet (5:1-2; 7:8b-9; 9:17; 10:12-14), כל-רוחו יוציא כסיל וחכם באחור ישבחה.

<sup>5</sup>Pss 63:4; 106:47; 117:1; 145:4; 147:12; 1 Chr 16:35. Ps 145:4 uses other words found in Qohelet: דור לדור ישבח מעשים וגבורתיך יגידו.

in v.3 may be contracted from עַד-הֵן<sup>6</sup>. However, Whitley (1979:41) argues, 'it must be borne in mind that the words עַדְנָה "hitherto" and עַדֵּן "still" are distinctive in origin. עַדְנָה derives from a root עָדָה "up to, till, until", עַדֵּן from a root עָדָד "at the same time, during, while, when".' But whether or not this is the case, the similarity of the two words serves to connect them. The additions also recall the descriptions of 'the ascending one' and 'the descending one' in 3:21, הָעֹלָה הִיא לְמַעַלָּה ... הִירְדָּת הִיא לְמַטָּה - both verses addressing the subject of death and what advantages it may or may not bring.

The use of עַדֵּן in v.3 adds a note of ambiguity because it may indicate that the one described in this verse is *yet* to be born - sometime in the future. If it is better to be dead than alive, then it seems a contradiction to maintain that one who has yet to live is better than both - unless it is the fact of the oppression which the author observes that makes it better to be dead, in which case the one not yet born may avoid this particular evil that is done under the sun. However, it should be noted that the one who is better off in 6:1-6 will never see what happens under the sun, nor even see the sun (גַּם-שֶׁמֶשׁ לֹא-רָאָה, v.5), because (s)he is still-born. But in 6:1-6 the contrast is not with the living in general, but with one who does 'not see good' (לֹא-רָאָה, v.6 - the expression לֹא-רָאָה occurs only in 4:3 and 6:5,6).

There is considerable irony that the 'one' (by implication) who has not yet been born is better than the 'two' - the living and the dead. The contrast between טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן-הָאֶחָד in v.9, and טוֹב מִשְׁנַיִם אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עַדֵּן לֹא הָיָה contributes to the uncertainty over just what is 'good' for people.

#### 10.1.2 4:4-7

The key word in v.4 is קִנְאָה, which might be rendered either 'jealousy'<sup>7</sup>, or, more commonly, 'zeal'<sup>8</sup>, and is often used of Yahweh. Which nuance is understood here dramatically affects the tone of the verse. A number of commentators unquestioningly adopt the meaning found less frequently elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible of 'jealousy'<sup>9</sup>, and interpret the verse in a decidedly negative way. But it could equally be read quite positively, in line with

<sup>6</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:117).

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Num 5:14; Prov 6:34; 27:4.

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Isa 42:13; 63:15; Zech 1:14; 8:2; etc.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:117); Eaton (1983:92); Fox (1989:202).



the word's usual sense of 'zeal'. Crenshaw (1988:108) quotes from the Talmud (Baba Bathra 21a) where the same word is used in the phrase, 'the *rivalry* of scholars increases wisdom,' and something similar might apply here.

Two further points should be noted about this verse. Firstly, we should recall the ambiguity of עמל both here and in v.6 - it could indicate something negative, 'toil', something neutral, 'work', or something positive, 'wealth'. Any of these might apply here. Secondly, there are words in the verse which are probably from two different roots רעות and מרעהו:רעה. This further illustrates the author's propensity for playing with different roots - and the use of רוח ורעיון הבל in v.16 offers an example of a word which may or may not be from the same root as רעות here (cf וברעיון in 2:22).

The difficulty with the two proverbs in 4:5,6 is in determining what each means and assessing how they relate to each other. Fox (1989:202), for example, asserts that they are 'Two complementary - not contradictory - proverbs, the first condemning indolence, the second excessive work.' Gordis (1968:240), however, disagrees, saying of v.5, 'This verse and the following one are diametrically opposed to each other.' Similarly, Ogden (1984:450) argues that the effect of v.6 is 'to reverse the values of the elements in vv.4,5 and to produce a paradoxical statement.'

The only other occurrences of חבק in Qohelet are in 3:5, עת לחבוק ועת לרחק מחבק. This suggests that there is a time for 'embracing' or 'clasping', and also a time to refrain from such action. Presumably the fool clasps his hands (= the English phrase 'folds his arms'?) at an inappropriate time. However, it is not clear what the consequence of this is, because it is expressed by the strange phrase ואכל את-בשרו. The closest equivalent elsewhere is in Isa 49:26, where it seems to indicate destroying oneself, <sup>10</sup>והאכלתי את-מוניך את-בשרם. This would fit the context here, giving a interpretation, 'The fool sits with his arms folded and in the process destroys himself'. However, as Crenshaw (1988:109) points out, the phrase might be rendered 'he eats his own meat.' He goes on to explain, 'Qohelet's aphorism may have quite another meaning, pointing out a paradox that in an imperfect world even fools who refuse to join the rat race resulting from jealousy sometimes have adequate meat.' This would

<sup>10</sup>Cf Mic 3:3; Ps 27:2; Prov 31:14.

yield the interpretation, 'The fool sits with his arms folded yet still manages to have enough to eat.'

Besides the question of the meaning of עמל, the main difficulty in v.6 is in determining the role played by the concluding words, ורעות רוח. Only here does this expression occur without the word הבל (רעיון רוח is used once without הבל in 1:17), but similar sentiments to this verse may be found in 5:15, ומה-יתרון לו שיעמל לרוח. However, this begs the question whether 'one handful of rest' is better than 'two hands full of work/wealth', ורעות רוח serving as a catchphrase appended (somewhat awkwardly) to the proverb, or whether the comparison is specifically with 'two hands full of work/wealth *and* striving for the wind' - this perhaps being synonymous with the expression in 5:15 עמל לרוח. This makes a considerable difference to the meaning of the verse, and its relation to the previous verse: it could mean either that rest is better than work/wealth, or that rest is better than fruitless or futile work. Either way, there is a rather subtle irony in the fact that here again one is better than two: 'better *one* [by implication] handful of rest than *two* [by implication] hands full of work/wealth.'

### 10.1.3 4:8-12

The negativity of the situation described in v.8 is emphasised by three occurrences of the word אין. Moreover, its position at the end of the second clause, גם בן ואח אין-לו, brings אין-לו and אין קץ, at the start of the third clause, together. The verse contains two balanced parts, each of which has the word גם at the centre - though the first should be rendered 'also', while the second may be adversative<sup>11</sup>:

יש אחד ואין שני גם בן ואח אין-לו  
ואין קץ לכל-עמלו גם-עיניו לא-תשבוע<sup>12</sup> עשר

עמלו could be rendered either 'his work' or 'his wealth': in the first case it may be the tedium of his endless work that is the issue, in the second the fact that he is exceedingly wealthy but still gains no satisfaction from his riches. עמל in the next clause should be rendered 'work', which may suggest that the same applies here - but the author again seems to be playing on different senses of the same word.

<sup>11</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:128-30).

<sup>12</sup>This is a further example of disagreement in number between verb and noun. However, *qere* has the singular, and is supported by LXX, Syr and Targ.



The balance of these two lines draws attention to the third part of the verse, which is also striking because of the sudden change from third to first person, with no indication that the person described earlier in the verse is now speaking. Commentators are divided on whether these are the author's own words. Barton (1912:115) argues, 'Qoheleth suddenly drops the indirect discourse and transfers us to the soul of the miser, perhaps his own soul, for this may be a bit of personal experience;' Eaton (1983:93) suggests that 'The Preacher puts himself in the shoes of the lonely man;' while Gordis (1968:242) maintains, 'Koheleth is citing the hypothetical argument that a man without family ties would have used. Hence we must supply: "*He never asks himself* 'for whom, etc.'"' The fact is, however, that no clear indication is given, and the reader is left to form his or her own response to the sudden change.

As well as the play on the meaning of עמל, there is also a play in this section on the word טוב. It is used once in v.8 and twice in v.9, and should probably be translated by a different word each time: perhaps, 'depriving myself of pleasure'; 'better two than one'; and 'they get a good return for their work'. Although there is disagreement over the precise translations of טוב and עמל in these verses, it seems clear that the author is playing on the difference nuances of the words.

אשר in v.9 should be noted, because it is an unusual use of the word as a conjunction. However, it is not without precedent<sup>13</sup>, and seems to be used in this way elsewhere in Qohelet<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, Qohelet's use of אשר/ש- is very varied, which adds to the ambiguity of the book. כי אם in v.10 is a further example of words used in Qohelet to mean different things. Here and in 11:8 it means 'for if...', but in 3:12; 5:10; and 8:15 it means 'except'. יפלו in v.10 is also unusual because it is a plural verb used with a singular noun. We have noted other such grammatical anomalies in Qohelet, but this may be what Ges<sup>K</sup> (124e,o) describes as an 'indefinite singular' meaning something like 'if either one of them should fall.' It is singular in the Vulg. and Targ.

#### 10.1.4 4:13-16

This passage differs from the rest of ch.4 because it starts with the 'better than' saying, טוב ילד מסכן וחכם ממלך זקן וכסיל אשר לא-ידע להזהר עוד, and has the first person observation,

<sup>13</sup>Cf Gen 30:18; 34:27; Deut 3:24; Josh 4:7; Dan 1:10. See also Ges<sup>K</sup> (157a).

<sup>14</sup>See especially Isaksson (1987:150-6); Schoors (1992:138-49).

ראיתי את-כל-החיים המהלכים תחת השמש עם הילד השני אשר יעמד תחתיו at the centre. It may be that the words הילד השני refer back to 4:8-12, in which case one purpose of 4:13-16 is to show the *limited* advantage of there being a second person. Of course, the sense in which 'second' is used here is different to its use in vv.8,10, which in turn is different to שניהם in v.3, but this is typical of Qohelet.

Otherwise, this section seems to bear little connection with what precedes and follows it because its main theme is the limited advantage of wisdom over folly - a theme last considered in ch.2, not mentioned again until 6:8, and not discussed in any depth until ch.7. Indeed, it ties in particularly well with a story related in 9:14-17 where a poor but wise man (sic) is ultimately forgotten by those he serves. The word for 'poor' מסכן occurs only in these two passages in the Hebrew Bible, although the root occurs elsewhere in Isa 40:20; Deut 8:9. However, another root סכן, meaning 'incur danger', is used in Qoh 10:19.

There is a balance in the passage between the king/counsellor and the youth: מלך is used twice and מלכות once; ילד is used twice and נולד once. But it is not clear whether it is the same king/counsellor and the same youth referred to each time, and when explicit reference to either ceases towards the end of v.15 it becomes impossible to work out for certain to whom the pronominal suffixes refer. Moreover, the question raised above concerning the translation of the word מלך is particularly pertinent here. While 'king' is certainly an appropriate rendering, and forms a suitable contrast to the youth, מלך could also be translated 'counsellor'<sup>15</sup>. This would add a note of irony to the contrast between the ילד מסכן וחכם and מלך זקן וכסיל in v.13. The form of the niphal verb להזהר that is used in the last clause of the verse אשר לא-ידע להזהר עוד, lends itself to be read as the hiphil, 'instruct, admonish', which is particularly appropriate for a counsellor.

The ambiguity starts in v.14 where either the king/counsellor or the youth could be the subject of the two verbs and the pronominal suffix. Hence we might interpret vv.13,14 either,

Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king/counsellor who no longer knows to heed warning - for the old king/counsellor rose from prison to kingship (or to be counsellor) although he, like the youth, was born poor in his kingdom.

or,

<sup>15</sup>In fact, Ogden (1980:312-3) states, our suggestion here would be that *limlok* in v.14a is yet another of the many Aramaisms in Qoheleth, and that it refers to the ex-prisoner's new role not as monarch but as counsellor.



Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king/counsellor who no longer knows to heed warning - for the youth rose from prison to kingship/to be counsellor (hence deposing the foolish old king/counsellor) even though he had been born poor in his kingdom (either the youth's kingdom as it became, or the foolish old king's kingdom).

Both readings are grammatically feasible<sup>16</sup>, and the ambiguity may be intentional - especially in light of the continuing uncertainty in the following verses. Ogden (1980:309-15; 1987:71-2) suggests a further possibility: that there are two separate examples cited here introduced by כִּי and כִּי גַם. The first he sees as an allusion to Joseph, the second to David. However, the comparisons are inexact, and here as elsewhere in Qohelet it is probably futile to seek precise historical parallels.

The next difficulty, what Irwin (1944:256) terms 'the crux of interpretation,' concerns the expression הַיָּלֵד הַשֵּׁנִי in v.15. It might be read 'the second youth', and a number of commentators<sup>17</sup> read this to mean that where the first youth deposed the foolish king/counsellor, another youth will come along, win the support of 'everyone who goes about under the sun', and depose the first youth. Other commentators find here an unusual, but not unprecedented, Hebrew construction whereby the phrase means either, 'the youth, the second (of the above - i.e., the wise youth as opposed to the foolish king/counsellor)<sup>18</sup>, or 'the youth, the successor (to the king - i.e., the second in line)<sup>19</sup>. The introduction of the expression without any prior reference to another youth may serve both to recall the previous section, and to raise questions about who is referred to here, so that the reader has to make the decision for him- or herself.

תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ at the end of the verse is ambiguous. It could be a synonym for תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ at the end of the first half of the verse<sup>20</sup>, but more likely תַּחַת is being used in a different sense to indicate that the youth 'succeeds him' as king<sup>21</sup>. However, this leaves open the question

<sup>16</sup>Irwin (1944:256) comments,

Which of the two went forth to be king? And who born poor? It is idle to cite opinions of exegetes; they cover most, if not all, the possibilities - eloquent testimony to the obscurity of the passage if not of the exegetes also!

<sup>17</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:120); Crenshaw (1988:113-4); Fox (1989:207-8); Whybray (1989:89-90). Fox argues on the basis of the use of הַשֵּׁנִי in Exod 2:13 and Judg 20:24-5 that we render the word here 'the next'.

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., Eaton (1983:96). Cf Irwin (1944:256).

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., Gordis (1968:162,245). 1 Kgs 22:27 and Ps 60:5 offer near parallels to this construction using a noun where an adjective is used here. However, Gordis (1968:245) argues that there is an exact parallel in the phrase in Hos 2:9 אֵל אִשִּׁי הָרִאשׁוֹן, which he maintains should be translated 'to my husband, who was the first.'

<sup>20</sup>This is the view taken by Ogden (1987:73). But one of the grounds for his argument is that a new section begins at v.15 so that the pronominal suffix does not refer back to v.14. Cf Ogden (1980).

<sup>21</sup>Irwin (1944:257) reads it 'who continued in his own station in life.'

whether it is the youth mentioned earlier who succeeds the king, or a second youth who succeeds the first youth.

The suffixes in v.16 are also ambiguous. The plural suffix on לפניהם may refer to the foolish old king/counsellor and the youth(s), or to כל-העם mentioned earlier in the verse. This depends on whether לפניהם is read in a temporal or spatial sense. The nearest parallel in Qohelet is found in 1:10, כבר היה לעלמים אשר היה מלפננו, where מלפננו is clearly used in a temporal sense. On this reading the sentiments of 4:16 are similar to 1:11 - where אחרונים also occurs, אין זכרון לראשנים וגם לאחרנים שיהיו לא-יהיה להם זכרון עם שיהיו לאחרנה לפני. כל-אשר-היה לפני על-ירושלם, 1:16, and its near-equivalents in 2:7,9. If לפניהם is read in line with this usage, the phrase here may be rendered, 'to all who were before them' indicating that there was 'no end of people' who preceded both the king/counsellor and the youth(s)<sup>22</sup>.

However, לפניהם might also be read in a spatial sense. Thus many commentators<sup>23</sup> read לפניהם לכול אשר-היה לפניהם 'to all whom he was over', that is 'to all those whom he ruled.' Grammatically this makes good sense, particularly in light of the singular היה: however, העם could be the singular subject of היה even though its sense is plural; and the fact that אשר is proclitic to היה may suggest that the same subject should be referred to for both<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, there are other examples in Qohelet of לפני being used in a spatial sense: ירא מלפני אלהים in 3:14 and in 8:12,13; טוב לפני האלהים in 2:26 and 7:26; אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים in 5:1; ואל-תאמר לפני המלאך in 5:5; and כשגגה שיצא מפלני השליט in 10:5<sup>25</sup>. The precise word לפניהם is used elsewhere in Qohelet only in 9:1, but the uncertainties surrounding that verse mean that it is of little help in deciding the meaning of the word in 4:16.

A further complication is added by the word בו. If היה means 'he was' rather than 'the people were', then presumably the same 'he' is referred to here. In this case the verse could be interpreted, 'There was no end to all the people whom he ruled, yet those who come after will take no pleasure in him.' But if לכול אשר-היה לפניהם is translated 'all who were before

<sup>22</sup>See, e.g., Gordis (1968:245-6) and Crenshaw (1988:112,114). Ogden argues that because v.15 is the start of a new unit 'them' cannot refer back to the old king and the youth in the previous section: therefore 'if v.15 truly addresses a new context, "them" most likely relates to the crowds and the youth of v.15a.'

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:119); Eaton (1983:96); Fox (1989:208); Whybray (1989:90).

<sup>24</sup>LXX, Vulg., Syr. have the plural verb here.

<sup>25</sup>Both David and Solomon are described as coming in and going out לפני the people whom they served (e.g., 1 Sam 18:16; 2 Chr 1:10).



them', the singular suffix is more striking and may indicate that 'he' is not one of 'them' - 'There was no end to all the people who were before them [the king/counsellor and the first youth?], but those who come after will not even rejoice in him [the second youth?]'.

In fact, none of these ambiguities make any difference to the overall sense of the passage that despite one's remarkable rise to power and regardless of his/her wisdom or folly, (s)he will still be forgotten by those who come after<sup>26</sup>. The ambiguity operates on a different level - it raises questions in the reader's mind about who is being referred to throughout the passage, forcing him/her to work hard to try to pin down the references<sup>27</sup>. Perhaps the purpose is to indicate that they cannot be precisely tied down because they refer to everyone.

### 10.1.5 4:17-5:6

The verses in this passage which cause most difficulty for the reader are the first verse and the last verse. The first part of the first verse and the last part of the last verse do not present any problems in terms of *translation*, but 'watching your feet<sup>28</sup>' might be *interpreted* to mean either that one should take care, or that one should bow his or her head, and the same question about 'fearing God' which arose in 3:14 arises here also - does it imply simply an appropriate awe of God, or does it suggest being afraid of him? Thus both the opening and the closing clauses of the passage could be read either to indicate that one should take care before a God who engenders a degree of terror, or that one should show due respect to an awesome God. These two possibilities are important throughout the passage.

It is the second part of 4:17 and the first part of 5:6 that present problems for translation of the passage. There are four issues - involving all five words - which should be considered in relation to the clause *וּקְרוֹב לְשִׁמְעַת מַתַּת הַכְּסִילִים זִבַּח* in 4:17. The first concerns the infinitive absolute with which the phrase commences. It could be that it is used here as a substitute for a finite form continuing the imperative force with which the verse began, or, as

<sup>26</sup>This despite Irwin's assertion (1944:255) that 'this is one of the difficult passages of a none-too-easy book. Its confusion of pronominal antecedents is characteristic of Hebrew usage at its worst.'

<sup>27</sup>Contra Torrey (1952) who emends the text because 'The critical reader of this paragraph is left unsatisfied, for at more than one point there is obscurity, or even confusion' (1952:176). Torrey sees the 'gaps' and 'lacuna' in the text as evidence that something has been lost (one reason why he moves 10:16,17 to this passage) - we view them as part of the indeterminacy of a passage that actively engages the reader in producing meaning.

<sup>28</sup>*Ketib* רגליך, *qere* רגליך. The versions support the *qere* reading, and commentators are divided on which is preferable.

Crenshaw (1988:115) suggests, it may be 'better to understand *w<sup>e</sup>qarob* nominally and to assume ellipsis of *tob* before comparative *min*'<sup>29</sup>. 9:17, where we find what looks like a 'better than' comparison of the same type as in the verses before and after it, but without the טוב which both those verses contain, is sometimes cited as another example of such ellipsis<sup>30</sup>. Certainly if וקרוב is read as an infinitive, the line does seem to require something like טוב to be understood, although the NIV gets round this difficulty by supplying the word 'rather': 'Go near to listen *rather* than to offer the sacrifice of fools'. Gordis (1968:247), however, proposes another solution which he claims avoids the need for any additions. He suggests that based on the use of קרב in Pss 75:2; 119:151 and Job 17:12 to mean 'praise, glorify', it may be read here as an adjective with the sense, 'it is more praiseworthy.' This sense of the word, however, is not certain.

The second issue in this phrase concerns the word לשמע. שמע usually bears the meaning 'to hear or listen', but it also often conveys the sense 'to obey'. Either would be appropriate in this verse, but the latter would bring the sentiments of 4:14 very close to those expressed in 1 Sam 15:22,

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל הַחֹפֶץ לִיהוֹה בַּעֲלוֹת וּזְבָחִים כְּשָׁמַע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה הִנֵּה שָׁמַע מִזְבַּח טוֹב לְהַקְשִׁיב מִחֲלָב אֵילִים

However, Gordis (1968:247) suggests on the basis of Gen 11:7; 42:23; Deut 28:49; 2 Kgs 18:26; etc, and common Mishnaic usage that we should render the word here 'to understand'. This might be appropriate depending on how the remainder of the verse is interpreted. Of course, it is possible that the author intended to play on the different senses of the word.

The third issue concerns the word מתת. LXX, Vulg. and Syr. appear to have taken this word as the noun 'gift' which appears again in 5:18 - <sup>31</sup>זֶה מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא. However, as pointed the word consists of the comparative *mem* with the infinitive of נתן, תת, and thus means 'than to give'. The problem which this raises is the one mentioned above, that something like טוב then seems to be required to complete the comparison. Nonetheless, besides being true to the MT, this makes much more sense than the noun.

Finally, we should consider the phrase הכסילים זבח. As זבח is pointed it could be either the third person singular verb or the pausal form of the noun. The verb would make

<sup>29</sup>This is assumed in the rendering of this verse in the RSV, NEB and REB.

<sup>30</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:124-5); Crenshaw (1988:115). 6:5 may provide a further example.

<sup>31</sup>See also Crenshaw (1988:115).



little sense here, particularly as the subject is plural, but for the noun to make sense we would expect it to be in construct with **הכסילים** in which case it would usually precede this word. Despite this deviation from grammatical norms, it seems best to translate this phrase as 'the sacrifice of fools'.

These four issues make precise translation of this part of 4:17 difficult, but the meaning seems clear enough - one ought to draw near to the house of God prepared to heed his word rather than to present the type of sacrifice which fools offer (which, presumably, is what the following verses describe). By contrast, the meaning of the final section of the verse is far from clear, although unlike the preceding section it does make perfectly good grammatical sense as it stands. It might be translated, 'for they do not know to do evil,' and the most obvious reading of the phrase is 'for they do not know *how* to do evil.' However, this is often rejected because, as Barton (1912:125) argues, 'it is obviously contrary to Q.'s thought'. Various attempts have been made to get round this difficulty by emending the text<sup>32</sup> or postulating a different meaning for the *lamedh*<sup>33</sup>, but if we are to remain true to the MT (particularly when there is no good textual evidence for doing otherwise), perhaps we should follow Fox (1989:211) when he says 'Since MT is clear and grammatically feasible, I translate the sentence without understanding its point in context.'

The first part of 5:6 seems to pick up on the vocabulary of v.2: **חלם** occurs only in these two verses in Qohelet, words from the root **רבה/רב** occur twice in both verses and **דברים** is also used in both verses:

v.2      **כי בא החלום ברב ענין וקול כסיל ברב דברים**

v.6      **כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים הרבה**

In fact the similarity between these verses, along with the difficulty of interpretation of the first part of v.6, has led Barton (1912:125) to argue, 'its text is evidently corrupt. It is probably a variant of vs.3, and was written on the margin, afterwards creeping into the text'<sup>34</sup>.

Commentators adopt different methods of making sense of 5:6. Fox (1989:209,212) suggests two changes to the text - removal of the *waw* before **דברים** and emendation of **ברב** to

<sup>32</sup>Usually by supposing that a *mem* dropped out by haplography - though the resulting sentence is not good Hebrew - or by the addition **כי אם** as in 3:12 and 8:15.

<sup>33</sup>E.g., 'that they do evil', or 'when they do evil'. There is no conclusive evidence for either. Schoors (1992:182) argues for 'a gerundial force to the infinitive: "they are ignorant *while* they do evil".'

<sup>34</sup>See NEB which omits this part of the verse. It is, however, reintroduced in the REB.

כַּרְב - and renders the verse 'for a lot of talk is like a lot of dreams and absurdities. Rather, fear God!' Loader (1986:60) proposes that 'a Hebrew word for "injury" that is almost identical to the word for "vanity" has dropped out in the course of repeated copyings.' Gordis (1968:249); Ogden (1987:79) and Whitley (1979:49-50) all recommend reading the verse as it stands in the MT, but each offers a different interpretation. Gordis translates the verse, 'In spite of all the dreams, follies and idle chatter, indeed, fear God!', arguing that 'כַּרְב is equivalent to "in spite of the multitude" ... on the concessive use of the *beth*, cf Ps 46:3; Isa 1:15, and see BDB p.91a.' Ogden proposes, 'In many dreams, enigmas, and profusion of words.' And Whitley suggests, 'for in a multitude of dreams and vanities there are *indeed* many words', contending that 'the syntactical difficulty of our passage disappears if we recognise that *waw* may have an asseverative or emphatic function'<sup>35</sup>. We might also note that הַרְבֵּה could be read in different ways: it could also be the infinitive absolute or the hiphil imperative. The infinitive absolute would balance the use of this form of the verb in 4:17, as the imperative יִרָא at the end of this verse balances the imperative with which 4:17 starts, but it is difficult to see what sense it might make. The imperative, 'increase words!' might make sense in the verse, although the *waw* on וְדַבְרִים is awkward, and would be quite ironic at the end of a passage warning against excessive words. However, perhaps in the end we should with Crenshaw (1988:118) observe the 'ambiguous syntax' and admit that 'no solution seems entirely satisfactory'<sup>36</sup>. As the verse stands, it consists simply of a list with an exhortation to 'fear God' attached to the end.

The ambiguity in v.1 is not in terms of translation, but in terms of what the exhortations imply. Are they intended to encourage a healthy reverence for the God of heaven, as, for example, Whybray (1989:94) argues<sup>37</sup>,

It is quite erroneous to interpret this saying as meaning that prayer is useless because God is unconcerned with human affairs: Qoheleth does not advise his readers not to pray, but rather to remember God's awesome sovereignty and to address him carefully as one would a human superior.

<sup>35</sup>On the emphatic function of *waw*, see Schoors (1992:124-8). The *waw* in the second וּמִקְרָה in 3:19 (Gordis, 1969:237); in וְלֹא in 6:10 (Whitley, 1979:61); in וְעַל in 8:2 (Gordis, 1968:288); and at the beginning of 11:7 (Lauha, 1978:206) have also been suggested as examples of its emphatic function.

<sup>36</sup>See also Whybray (1989:96).

<sup>37</sup>See also Ogden (1987:77) and Eaton (1983:98-9). It is perhaps noteworthy that Crenshaw (1988:116) and Fox (1989:211), who generally take a pessimistic view of Qoheleth, are more circumspect in respect of a pessimistic interpretation of this verse. Indeed, Fox (1989:209) concedes that 'this unit is remarkable for the conventionality of its content.'



Or does it bemoan a God who is remote from the human sphere here on earth as, for example, Loader (1986:58) contends<sup>38</sup>,

This is certainly one of the most telling pronouncements that enlightens our study of the Preacher's God-concept. God is the far off remote power; there is a gap between him and human beings. It is not possible to bridge it by way of speech. Prayer is not so much wrong as senseless.

The sentiments of Deut 4:35-40 are pertinent, particularly v.39 where God is in heaven - but on earth too, וידעת היום והשבת אל-לבבך כי יהוה הוא האלהים בשמים ממעל ועל-הארץ מתחת. This raises the question whether Qoh 5:1 is a confirmation of such sentiments, or whether it calls them into question, i.e., 'God is in heaven, but you are on earth'.

The main difficulty in v.2 is the meaning of the word ענין. We concluded above that ענין is probably a neutral term meaning 'occupation, task, business', but that it may carry negative connotations because the root from which it derives, ענה, usually in the Hebrew Bible bears the meaning 'be bowed down, afflicted'. The sense of 'affliction' would fit the context here well. Nonetheless, the relevance of the first half of the verse is not at all obvious, while the second half fits the theme of the passage well. It also ties in well with 10:12-15, especially the similar phrase in 10:14, והסכל ירבה דברים.

אל-תאחר in v.3 contrasts with אל-תבהל and אל-ימהר in v.1: where haste was warned against when speaking to God in v.1, here haste is encouraged when it comes to fulfilling vows. We noted the similarity between v.1 and Deut 4:39, as well as between Qoh 4:17 and 1 Sam 15:22, and this verse bears a striking resemblance to Deut 23:22:

אלהיך לא תאחר לשלמו	Deut 23:22
לאלהים אל-תאחר לשלמו	Qoh 5:3

It is notable that the reference to Yahweh is absent in Qohelet.

The end of v.3 is particularly abrupt. Without any introductory word or prefixed element, it launches straight into the final clause with an unusual use of what appears to be the object marker<sup>39</sup>, את אשר-תדר שלם. The abruptness, the unusual construction and the placing of the verb at the end of the clause and sentence serve effectively to emphasise the verb and to stress the need for fulfilment of one's vows.

<sup>38</sup>See also Barton (1912:116); Davidson (1989:211); Gordis (1968:248).

<sup>39</sup>On this use of את, see Schoors (1992:26-7).

The same verb is used at the end of v.4 - the 'better than' saying. It functions here in a different way because the verse is constructed in a chiasmus which places the two occurrences of the verb נדר at the centre, and puts טוב and תשלם in parallel:

טוב לא תדר תדר לא תשלם

Thus it is the *good*-ness of fulfilling vows that is emphasised, rather than implying that it is better not to make vows at all. This contradicts Crenshaw's claim (1988:117), 'while Deuteronomy encourages the making of vows, Qohelet discourages them.'<sup>40</sup>

The main thing to note in v.5 is the word המלאך. LXX and Pesh. assume האלהים here instead. This is perhaps what one might expect in view of the parallels we noted above between this verse and v.1. Moreover, there is a particular focus on God in this section, and it is God's response that is the subject of the next part of the verse. Indeed, the word לאלהים occurs *precisely* at the centre of the passage (51 words either side), with three occurrences of האלהים before it and two occurrences plus המלאך after it:

האלהים	4:17
האלהים	5:1a
האלהים	5:1b
none	5:2
לאלהים	5:3
none	5:4
המלאך	5:5a
האלהים	5:5b
האלהים	5:6

Fox (1989:209,212) argues,

The two readings must be granted equal textual claim to validity. From the literary perspective, however, "to God" seems the preferable reading, for it is the expression used in 5:1, and its repetition gives a tighter structure to the passage.

However, it may be a human intermediary between God and humankind that is envisaged<sup>41</sup>, perhaps a temple priest although only in Mal 2:7 is the term used elsewhere of a priest. This reading is also typical of Qohelet's propensity for using unexpected terms.

Despite a number of ambiguities and difficulties in 4:17-5:6, the overall sense of the passage is reasonably clear. It calls the reader (this is the first extended section of second per-

<sup>40</sup>See also Loader (1986:59).

<sup>41</sup>Crenshaw (1988:117); Eaton (1983:100); Ogden (1987:79); Salters (1978:97-100) and Whybray (1989:96) all adopt this reading. Gordis (1986:249) agrees, adding that 'Kohleth may be using the term with a sarcastic over-tone.'



son address in Qohelet) to take care in the way that (s)he approaches, and particularly addresses, God. But, as we discussed in relation to 4:17, the question arises whether it is 'good' for people to do this because one may thus avoid the wrath of God, or because this is the proper attitude to adopt in worship of him.

## 10.2 Conclusions

Again we have noted throughout 4:1-5:6 a large number of fairly minor points of ambiguity which serve constantly to involve the reader in the process of filling in gaps of indeterminacy so as to find meaning in the text. However, there are three more major ambiguities which bear repeating. Firstly, the uncertainty in 4:13-16 over who is being referred to by the pronouns and pronominal suffixes is a very effective way of forcing the reader to work hard to make sense of the text. As we suggested earlier, this may serve to make her/him question whether it is possible to determine who is being referred to, and perhaps to realise that the implications of the text extend beyond the characters involved, and may even apply to the reader her- or himself. This is a strategy the author employs again later in the book.

Secondly, the ambiguity in 4:17-5:6 over what attitude one should adopt towards God, whether of awe or terror, is of considerable importance for the interpretation of the book as a whole. How the reader understands the author's views of God will greatly affect how (s)he understands the book. This is a recurring question which we have already met in 1:13 and at the end of ch.2, and throughout ch.3.

Thirdly, there is considerable ambiguity throughout the section concerning what is 'good' or 'better', and what it is 'good' for people to do. It is an important aspect of Qohelet that the author sets out to find what is good for people, but arrives at conclusions that may be interpreted in quite different ways. This is the primary focus of 4:1-5:6, and is a theme which is picked up again in ch.7.

## CHAPTER 11, What is Good and Bad about Wealth (5:7-6:9)

### 11.1 Commentary

#### 11.1.1 5:7-8

Both these verses present some difficulty for the reader of Qohelet. V.7 seems, as was suggested previously, to allude to 4:1 and 3:16-17: 'If you see the poor oppressed', ties in well with the author's observation in 4:1, 'I have seen all the oppression that is practised'; and the sentiments about right and justice being denied, and the use of the words **משפט**, **צדק** and **החפץ** tie the verse in with 3:16-17. However, the question then arises whether the second half of this verse is more in line with the decidedly negative conclusion the author reaches in 4:1, **והנה דמעת העשקים ואין להם מנחם ומיד עשקיהם כח ואין להם מנחם**, or the positive statement in 3:17, **את-הצדיק ואת-הרשע ישפט האלהים**. It might be rendered, 'A high official is watched over by a(nother) high official, and (more) high officials over them,' or, 'A high official is watched over by a higher official, and (even) higher officials over them,' implying that those responsible for the oppression watch each others' backs and perpetuate it<sup>1</sup>. Alternatively it might be interpreted to mean that each tier of officials oppresses the tier beneath so that the poor who are on the bottom layer are squeezed the hardest<sup>2</sup>. Either way, there is little hope of relief from oppression or of re-establishment of justice and right. However, the verse might also be read to indicate that one should not be stupified by oppression, etc., because those responsible are watched over by higher officials so that eventually justice will be done. Ogden (1987:80) parses **גבהים** as 'the plural of majesty'<sup>3</sup>, and maintains that it is 'the most exalted one' who 'stands above those who oppress the poor and ravage society.' This could be read in line with 3:17 and taken to mean that God will eventually bring about justice.

To some extent the interpretation of 5:7 will depend on how **אל-תתמה** is understood. The root **תמה** is rare in the Hebrew Bible, occurring only here in Qohelet, and ten times elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. It seems in all these instances to indicate more than amazement, conveying rather a total inability to comprehend the situation - possibly even a debilitating lack of comprehension.

<sup>1</sup>Cf, e.g., Eaton (1983:101); Fox (1989:213); Whybray (1989:97).

<sup>2</sup>Cf, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:118-9); Davidson (1986:36-7); Loader (1986:60).

<sup>3</sup>Cf BDB p.147.

<sup>4</sup>Gen 43:33; Deut 28:28; Isa 13:8; 29:9; Jer 4:9; Hab 1:5,5; Zech 12:4; Ps 48:6; Job 26:11.



Deut 28:28, **יככה יהוה בשגעון ובעורון ובתמהון לבב**, is particularly pertinent in this regard. It uses a word from the root **תמה** and also the **-ון** ending characteristic of Qohelet in general and 5:8-11 in particular. Deut 28:29 then refers to oppression and robbery using the same words that are used in Qoh 5:7. Moreover, it states that there is nobody to save those who are robbed and oppressed, which may have a bearing on the interpretation of the second half of Qoh 5:7, **והיית אך עשוק וגזול כל-הימים ואין מושיע**. If **אל-תתמה** implies that one should not be debilitated by the oppression, etc., that (s)he sees, the rest of the verse may give grounds for hoping that things can be different. However, if it indicates amazement, the rest of the verse may simply offer an explanation of why things are the way they are - and offer no hope.

Commentators describe v.8 as 'a puzzle' (Davidson, 1986:37); 'enigmatic' (Whitley, 1979:50); 'a crux' (Barton, 1912:131); 'an insuperable crux' (Gordis, 1968:250); 'totally obscure' (Crenshaw, 1988:119); and Fox (1989:213) asserts that 'the text is almost certainly corrupt.' It is also variously rendered in the English versions, for example, 'The best thing for a country is a king whose own lands are well tilled' in the NEB and REB; 'The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields' in the NIV (and NJB is similar); 'But in all, a king is an advantage to a land with cultivated fields' in the RSV; and 'Thus the greatest advantage in all the land is his: he controls a field that is cultivated' in NJPS. Both halves of the verse are obscure, the relationship between the words in each half is uncertain, and it is far from clear how the middle word of the verse, **היא**, relates to each half - in fact, the gender of the word is also unclear.

**יתרון** might be rendered 'advantage' or 'profit', as seems to be the case elsewhere in the book, or it might indicate 'abundance'. **ארץ** may be the physical land, or by extension the people of the land - as in 1:4. Together these two words might mean 'the advantage of land', or 'the land's (or the people's) advantage', or 'land is an advantage', or 'the abundance of the land'. **הכל** elsewhere in Qohelet usually means 'everything', but sometimes indicates 'everyone'. **בכל** might, then, mean 'in everything', or perhaps 'for everyone' (in which case the preposition seems inappropriate, but the same may apply to **לשדה**). **היא** may be read as the feminine pronoun, with the *ketibh* reading, or the masculine pronoun, with the *qere* reading - BHS conflates the two. It might refer to **ארץ** in the first half of the verse, or to **מלך** in

the second half, or back to the situation described in the previous verse<sup>5</sup>. However it is read, it occurs precisely at the centre of the verse. מֶלֶךְ is odd if it starts the second half of the verse, because it takes no conjunction. It is also unclear how it relates to the following words: is he king of a cultivated field, whatever that might mean, or is his advantage in having cultivated fields, or does his profit come from a cultivated field, or is he served by a field, or is a field served by him? There are so many imponderables in this short verse that it is quite impossible to state with any certainty what it might mean. This raises the question whether errors have crept in, or whether it was so designed by the author.

### 11.1.2 5:9-11

There are a number of plays on words in 5:9-11 which help to convey the irony of the person who has great wealth but does not gain any real benefit from it. There are also a few anomalies which should be noted.

The use of לֹא-יִשְׂבַּע in v.9 is ironic because another word from the root שָׂבַע is used in v.11 as a synonym for בְּהִמּוֹן (and perhaps also for יִתְרוֹן in v.8). Thus the first and last verses of this section establish a link between 'surfeit' and 'not being satisfied' - an important theme in 5:7-6:9.

The main difficulty in v.9 concerns the absence of a verb following the second לֹא. There are three solutions proposed by commentators: either the pointing of תְּבוּאָה is changed so that it is the third person feminine imperfect of the verb בּוֹא with the third person masculine pronominal suffix<sup>6</sup>, 'it will not come to him', similar to Pesh.; or, following LXX and Targ., לוֹ, 'to him' is inserted after לֹא<sup>7</sup>; or לֹא is understood to represent לֹא-יִשְׂבַּע which appeared in the first half of the verse<sup>8</sup>. The last has the advantage that it does not require emendation of the text, and there are a number of other instances in Qohelet where it appears that a word used earlier in the verse, or in a previous verse, is omitted but its sense retained.

הַטּוֹבָה in v.10 seems to mean 'wealth'. We noted above the play on the word טוֹב in 2:1,3,24-26; 3:12-13; 4:8-12 - this is also an important feature of 5:9-6:6. In 5:10 there is a

<sup>5</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:34-5).

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Gordis (1968:251).

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Whitley (1979:51).

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:214).



play on the words רבו and ברבות, and on the word אוכליה. The expression רבו אוכליה could be read in two ways: either ‘those who enjoy it increase,’ perhaps in number or perhaps in standing, or ‘those who eat it get bigger.’ This is picked up in the next verse.

There is some irony in the reference in 5:10 to ‘the sight<sup>9</sup> of his eyes’. Similar, but slightly different, expressions occur four times elsewhere in the book:

לא-תשבע עין לראות	1:8
כי אם-ראית עיניו	5:10
טוב מראה עינים מהלך-נפש	6:9
וטוב לעינים לראות את-השמש	11:7
והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך	11:9

1:8 uses the verb שבע as in 5:8 to suggest that ‘the sight of the eyes’ fails to satisfy. But in 6:9; 11:7,9 ‘the sight of the eyes’ seems to be treated more positively.

A sharp contrast is drawn in v.11 between העבד (which may recall נעבד in v.8) in the first half of the verse, and העשיר as (s)he is portrayed in the second half. Within the verse a concentric pattern is established whereby the ‘sweet sleep’ of the worker at the beginning of the verse, is contrasted with the lack of sleep of the rich person at the end; and the ‘little or much’ of the worker with the surfeit of the rich:

sweet sleep - little or much - surfeit - lack of sleep

The ‘little or much (s)he eats/enjoys’ is quite striking in a passage full of references to wealth and abundance which brings no pleasure. Moreover, the expression הרבה יאכל plays on the similar expression in v.10, רבו אוכליה. Again it could refer to eating or enjoying, but this time the word from the root רב/רבה should be rendered ‘much’ rather than ‘increase’. Of course, the surfeit of the rich which prevents him/her sleeping could be the result of over-eating - much less of a danger for the poor. It might also be the abundance of a rich person’s wealth that keeps him/her awake because (s)he worries about it. Probably the ambiguity is intentional.

The phrase איננו מניח לו means ‘it is not permitted to him’, but there is also a play on the word נוח meaning ‘rest’, because this is precisely what the rich person cannot do. This recalls the use of נחת in 4:6, טוב מלא כף נחת ממלא הפנים עמל, and 6:5 picks up on this again

<sup>9</sup>*Ketibh*, ראית; *qere* ראות. Schoors (1992:35) argues that the *ketibh* reading is to be preferred.

when it says of the stillborn (probably?) compared to the rich person who does not enjoy his/her wealth, נחת לזה מזה.

There is considerable irony in the fact that after a tremendous emphasis on wealth and abundance in these verses, in the end the issue comes down to sleep! This may recall such verses as Ps 127:1-2,

אם-יהוה לא-יבנה בית שוא עמלו בוניו בו  
אם-יהוה לא-ישמר-עיר שוא שקד שומר  
שוא לכם משכימי קום מאחרי-שבת  
אכלי לחם העצבים כן יתן לידידו שנא

### 11.1.3 5:12-16

The opening of 5:12-16 is repeated in 6:1 (which is an important aspect of the structure of this section), and again in 10:5, but typical of Qohelet it is slightly different each time:

5:12	יש רעה חולה	ראיתי תחת השמש
6:1	יש רעה אשר	ראיתי תחת השמש
10:5	יש רעה	ראיתי תחת השמש

A feature of all these verses is that יש רעה is emphasised by being placed at the start of the verse. This is of particular note because to this point in Qohelet the first person verb has usually been at the beginning of the verse, but in these verses it is displaced by יש רעה. רעה and חלה are key words in 5:12-16.

5:12 opens and closes with a reference to רעה. The first should probably be rendered 'evil', the second 'to his harm'<sup>10</sup>. Where the same root is used to convey these different ideas, two different roots are used for 'seeing' - ראיתי for 'I saw', and שמור for 'watched over'. These are arranged in a chiasmic pattern thus:

יש רעה clause - 'seeing' clause - 'seeing' clause - רעה

This serves to illustrate that everything the author saw 'under the sun' concerning wealth was surrounded by 'evil' of some sort.

V.13 is a reversal of v.12 (using the same number of words - and almost exactly the same number of letters: 30 as compared to 29), because instead of having רעה at the beginning and end, it has רע at the centre - this time probably best rendered by 'bad' or 'unfortunate'. Moreover, where v.12 has an observation about wealth at the centre, v.13 starts and ends with

<sup>10</sup>But note that the subject, בעליו, is plural. See also the singular suffix on עיניו in 5:10, whose subject is בעליה. Cf Schoors (1992:72-3).



a reference to *loss* of wealth. The change from the emphasis on great abundance in vv.9-12 to absolutely nothing at the end of this verse constitutes a dramatic turn around. This is heightened by the mention of the birth of a son, which would usually be a signal of great blessing, but serves here only to exacerbate the tragedy.

ואין בידו מאומה is emphasised by being repeated in extended form at the end of the next verse, except that the words בידו and מאומה occur the other way around, and אין is replaced by לא-ישא:

ואין בידו מאומה

ומאומה לא-ישא בעמלו שילך בידו

The pronominal suffix on בידו is ambiguous because it could refer either to the father or to the son, and this ambiguity is sustained in both verses, and also in vv.15,16<sup>11</sup>. In this regard, it should be noted that there is no direct mention in this passage of any person - (s)he is always referred to simply by pronominal suffixes and third person verbs. Perhaps the intention is a deliberate ambiguity like that of 4:13-16. But this raises the question as to what purpose the author might have in so confusing the reader. Perhaps the intention is to prompt him/her to ask in each instance, 'to whom does this verse apply?', and to come to the conclusion that it could apply to anyone - any of the characters in the text, but also more widely to anyone else including the reader him- or herself.

By contrast, כל-האדם אשר נתן-לו האלהים is referred to in 5:17-19 - in fact, כל-האדם אשר נתן-לו האלהים occurs at the centre of that passage. האדם occurs again in 6:1, but 6:2 opens with a clause very similar to the one at the centre of 5:17-19, except it uses איש instead of כל-האדם:

אשר נתן-לו האלהים	כל-האדם	5:18
אשר יתן-לו האלהים	איש	6:2

There is no obvious reason for the change. איש occurs again in 6:3, and that man is the basis of a comparison with a stillborn throughout the rest of 6:3-6, although there is again ambiguity concerning the subject of vv.4-6.

The first half of v.14 is very similar to Job 1:21:

<sup>11</sup>Ogden (1987:423) notes,

The specific problem in Ec 5:13-17 lies in identifying the referents of the third person pronouns. If we are to translate the passage adequately we must first establish who is being referred to by these pronouns, then make that clear in translation.

Job 1:21 ויאמר ערם יצתי מבטן אמי וערם אשוב שמה  
 Qoh 5:14 כאשר יצא מבטן אמו ערום ישוב ללכת כשבא

Job 1:21 continues, יהוה נתן ויהוה לקח יהי שם יהוה מברך, and it is significant that if Qohelet alludes to this verse, it does not mention Yahweh even when what is, and is not, given by God is so important a feature of 5:17-19 and 6:1-2. It is also significant that Job is pictured as a very wealthy man who undeservingly lost everything he had, including his children.

The start of v.15 repeats the expression וגם-זה רעה חולה from v.12: זה רעה חולה. This introduces an element of surprise to the verse because on almost every other occasion that a clause starts with the words גם זה it finishes with הבל. 1:17; 2:24 and 9:13 are the only exceptions: in both 2:24 and 9:13 it is a further observation that is introduced, גם-זה ראיתי, while 1:17 concludes שגם-זה הוא רעיון רוח. In 6:2 there is a further element of surprise, because while זה is followed in this instance by הבל, הבל is not followed by ורעות רוח as elsewhere, but by וחלי רע הוא.

The next clause, כל-עמַת שבא כן ילך, is usually translated something along the lines of 'exactly, or in all respects, (s)he shall go as (s)he came'<sup>12</sup>. To obtain this reading most commentators propose a slight emendation of the pointing of כל- which as it stands in the MT, with the *kamets* under the *kaph*, means 'all' - to a *hireq* under the *kaph* and a *shwa* under the *lamedh*. This represents the combination of the two prepositions ל- and כ- as in the Aramaic כל-קבל in Dan 2:8,12,40. מלעמַת in 1 Kgs 7:20 is also cited as an example of a compound formed from עמַת and two prepositions<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, BHS suggests it be read כלעמַת.

עמַת occurs thirty times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and is always preceded by the preposition ל-. In some passages it appears to mean 'adjoining'<sup>14</sup>, while in other passages it seems to have developed the sense 'corresponding to' or 'in the same way'<sup>15</sup>. This is its meaning in Qoh 7:14, ביום טובה היה בטוב ויום רעה ראה גם את-זה לעמַת-זה עשה האלהים, the only other occurrence of the word in this book. In accordance with this sense of the word, we might read כל-עמַת in 5:15 as 'all alike' or 'all, in similar fashion.' The additional 'sickening evil' which the verse notes would then be that 'all, in similar fashion [to the person described

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:126,132); Crenshaw (1988:119); Gordis (1968:253-4); Ogden (1987:85); Schoors (1992:146) and Whybray (1989:101) who says, 'the meaning is clear'! Cf Ges<sup>K</sup>, 161b.

<sup>13</sup>Whitley (1979:53) gives a good summary of this argument.

<sup>14</sup>E.g., Exod 25:27; 28:27; Lev 3:9.

<sup>15</sup>E.g., Ezek 40:18; 1 Chr 24:31; 26:12.



in the previous verse] who come go thus.’ This would form an appropriate conclusion to the questions raised by the ambiguity of the preceding verses, and might lead into the question at the end of this verse, ‘and what advantage is there for him [i.e. ‘anyone’] who works for the wind.’

V.16 seems not to make sense as it stands in the MT. Barton (1912:132) maintains, ‘The MT of the verse is obviously corrupt; a translation of the present text is impossible.’ Similarly, and more recently, Ogden (1987:85) has maintained that it ‘defies adequate translation.’

For בַּחֲשֶׁךְ יֹאכַל, the LXX reads *εν σκοτει και πενθει*, which would require two minor emendations to בַּחֲשֶׁךְ וְאֵבֶל, the *beth* presumably carrying over from בַּחֲשֶׁךְ. This use of the *beth* to modify later words is attested elsewhere in Job 12:12 and Jonah 2:4, although, as Gordis (1968:254) points out, there are many examples in Deut 28 where the *beth* is repeated. However, the first part of the verse already makes good grammatical sense in the MT, even if it is difficult to determine what it might *mean*.

אֵכֶל is an important word in 5:7-6:9, and, as we noted above, the author plays on its different meanings:

ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה	5:10
מתוקה שנת העבד אם-מעט ואם-הרבה <u>יֹאכַל</u>	5:11
גם כל-ימיו בַּחֲשֶׁךְ <u>יֹאכַל</u>	5:16
הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב אשר יפה לֹאכֹל-ולשתות	5:17
והשליטו לֹאכֹל ממנו	5:18
ולאו ישליטנו האלהים לֹאכֹל ממנו	6:2
כי איש נכרי יֹאכֹלנו	6:2

In 5:17 it refers to ‘eating’, in 5:18; 6:2,2 it seems to indicate ‘enjoying’, and in 5:10,11 both senses of the word are played on. חֲשֶׁךְ may point to a lack of understanding, as perhaps in 2:14, or it may indicate ‘obscurity’, as perhaps in 6:4,4; or it may be connected with death as in 11:8; 12:2,3. The last would be ironic because of the preceding כל-ימיו, but would fit in with the numerous allusions to death in this passage. However, none of these senses of the word gives an easy reading of the clause, and while there may be allusions to such things, it is perhaps best simply to render the word ‘darkness’. It may be that this recalls בְּלִילָה in 2:23 which displays similar sentiments:

2:23 כי כל-ימיו מאבים וכעס ענינו גם-בְּלִילָה לא שכב לבו

5:16 גם כל-ימיו בַּחֲשֶׁךְ יֹאכֹל וכעס הרבה וחליו וקצף

The second half of 5:16 does not seem to make sense, grammatical or otherwise, and Whitley (1979:54) asserts that 'this part of the verse is unintelligible.' LXX reads the verb כַּעַס as a noun, and omits the pronominal suffix on וַחֲלִיו (rendering it the same as in 6:2), but, in addition to the LXX rendering of the first half, this leaves the verse as a list without a verb. This is basically the translation Barton (1912:126) offers, but he adds 'he is': 'Also all his days *he is* in darkness...' However, the verse would be grammatically correct if no emendation were made to the first half, and this is how Crenshaw (1988:120,124) and Fox (1989:215) tackle the verse: 'Also all his days he eats in darkness and great vexation and sickness and anger.' Crenshaw (1988:124) suggests that the *waw* at the end of וַחֲלִיו may have arisen by dittography, but this could also work the other way around so that the text might be read as וַחֲלִי וְקִצְף rather than וַחֲלִיו קִצְף. This emendation alone would suffice to render the text grammatically correct. It would then read, 'All his days he eats in darkness, and he is greatly vexed, and his sickness is anger.' However, Gordis (1968:254-5) argues that is unnecessary because 'וַחֲלִי לוֹ constitutes an elliptical clause equivalent to לוֹ וַחֲלִי.' He cites in support Gen 22:24 where וּפִילְגֶשׁ לוֹ = וּפִילְגֶשׁ לָהֶם; וּפִילְגֶשׁ לוֹ in Ps 115:7 compared to אֵף לָהֶם ... אֵף לָהֶם in the previous verse; and Num 12:6 where אִם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם נְבִיא = אִם יִהְיֶה נְבִיאָכֶם. If this can be sustained, the text of the MT could then be rendered, 'Also all his days he eats in darkness, and he is greatly vexed and has sickness and anger.' Nonetheless, the sense of the verse is at best somewhat obscure, and may be hidden because of corruption.

Again the overall sense of this passage is reasonably clear - it portrays a person whose wealth causes him or her nothing but trouble, both when (s)he has it and when (s)he loses it. We noted a number of minor ambiguities and other difficulties facing the reader, but the primary ambiguity concerns who it is that the passage refers to. This is certainly an area of indeterminacy which requires the reader's active involvement in producing meaning. Some of the questions the passage raises are, 'for whom does wealth bring nothing but trouble?'; 'whose wealth may be lost in an unfortunate venture?'; 'who leaves this world with nothing, just as they entered it?'; 'whose days are filled with darkness, vexation, sickness and anger?' The answer is open - perhaps it could even be 'you', the reader.



## 11.1.4 5:17-19

Commentators respond quite differently to 5:17-19. Ogden (1987:86), for instance, argues that 'wealth, if it is actually divine in origin cannot be viewed in other than a positive way by Qoheleth.' Similarly, Whybray (1989a:102-3) contends that the author's intention is 'to correct any impression which the reader might have received from the previous section that he regards wealth as an evil *in itself*' [his emphasis]. He goes on to explain that, according to the author,

God when he bestows riches on a person bestows the power to enjoy them. It is implied, however, that this enjoyment depends on the recipient's willingness to see them in their true character as the *gift of God* rather than as obtainable only through his own desperate efforts which have been dismissed in vv.16-17 [15-16] as 'toiling for the wind'. [His emphasis]

By contrast, Crenshaw (1988:125) says,

In Qoheleth's affirmation about God, the notion of divine gift loses its comforting quality. The gift comes without rhyme or reason, it falls on individuals indiscriminately. Those who do not receive it can do nothing to change their condition.

Loader (1986:66) takes a similar line when he writes,

But who is responsible for the apportionment of favorable and unfavorable circumstances? God is - and his work is unpredictable and hence uncertain. By hinting at this unreliability and at the consequent lack of certainty for man, the Preacher draws even the favorable aspect of riches into the atmosphere of his pessimism.

Is this passage, then, designed as an ironical comment on the unfairness of God's apparently haphazard distribution of wealth and the power to enjoy it, or is it a call to enjoyment of wealth as a gift of God and not as an end in itself? Both readings are possible.

The opening of v.17 is difficult, and it is not helped by the fact that although this is a long verse there is no *zaqeph* or *athnah* to guide the reader. We noted earlier some examples of what appear to be inappropriate punctuation, but it is the lack of punctuation that is the problem here. The main question revolves round the three words טוב אשר-יפה, and particularly the meaning of אשר in this context. There are basically two schools of thought: either the two occurrences of אשר are co-ordinates giving a reading something like, 'Behold what I have seen to be good and beautiful: to eat...' <sup>16</sup>; or טוב is the end of the first clause, and אשר the start of the next, 'Behold what I have seen to be good: that it is beautiful to eat...' <sup>17</sup>. This opening to the verse distinguishes it from the other 'call to enjoyment' verses; but the pleonastic use of אני may play on the use of אין in all the others:

<sup>16</sup>See Gordis (1968:255); Ogden (1987:86).

<sup>17</sup>See Schoors (1992:139); Whitley (1979:55). Lohfink (1990:625) renders טוב אשר יפה, 'the supreme good'.

	אין-טוב באדם			2:24
	אין טוב במ	כי	ידעתי	3:12
מאשר	אין טוב	כי	וראיתי	3:22
אשר-יפה	אני טוב		הנה אשר-ראיתי	5:17
	אין-טוב לאדם		אשר	8:15

יפה is not found in any of the other verses, and this adds to the ambiguity because, as in 3:11, it could either be rendered 'beautiful' or 'appropriate'. The word only occurs in 3:11 and 5:17.

The opening to 5:17 may suggest that it is a direct response to 2:3, another long verse with the same number of words (26), and an almost identical number of consonants (96 in 5:17, 97 in 2:3 - but see below). A comparison of sections from each verse indicates well the link between the two:

	עד אשר-אראה אי זה טוב	2:3
	הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב	5:17
יעשו תחת השמים מספר ימי חייהם	אראה אי זה טוב לבני האדם אשר	2:3
בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש מספר ימי חיו	לראות טובה	5:17

Besides the link in subject matter, the phrase מספר ימי חייהם occurs only in these two verses and in 6:12, but it is slightly different each time:

מספר ימי חייהם	2:3
מספר ימי-חיו	5:17
מספר ימי-חיי	6:12

The sentiments of 6:12 are pertinent to 2:3 and 5:17, and also serve to cast considerable doubt on the conclusion drawn in 5:17, מי-יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי-חיי הבלו.

חיו in 5:17 should be noted, because it appears to be missing a *yodh* which is present every other time the noun חיים is used in Qohelet (2:3,17; 3:12; 4:2,2,15; 5:19; 6:8,12; 8:15; 9:3,4,5,9,9; 10:19). This may serve to draw attention to the word, but if a *yodh* is inserted, not only would it be grammatically correct, the verse would have precisely the same number of letters as 2:3. It is particularly noteworthy that the expression ימי חיי is used in 5:19.

What is given by God is clearly an important aspect of this passage. נתן-לו האלהים occurs in identical form in vv.17,18 - although the word אשר which precedes them is used differently. It should be observed that the phrase in 6:2 is not identical, which, along with the different use of אשר, means that here again three similar but slightly different phrases are used:



אשר נתן-לו האלהים	5:17
אשר נתן-לו האלהים	5:18
אשר יתן-לו האלהים	6:2

Also a different phrase is used at the end of 5:18 to convey the same idea, **זה מתת אלהים היא**.

The importance of what is given by God is further emphasised in this verse because **אשר נתן-לו האלהים** occurs near the start of the verse, and **זה מתת אלהים היא** at the end. This either places great importance on the acceptance of wealth, etc., as the gift of God, or creates considerable irony in 6:2 where what God does *not* give is emphasised. Such irony would also be served by the similarity of the opening of 5:18; 6:2, and the contrast of the final words in each:

5:18	כל-	האדם אשר נתן-לו האלהים עשר ונכסים	והשליטו	לאכל ממנו
6:2		איש אשר יתן-לו האלהים עשר ונכסים ... ולא	ישליטנו האלהים	לאכל ממנו

5:18	זה מתת אלהים היא
6:2	זה הבל וחלי רע הוא

The marked similarity between the verses serves to highlight the differences: the most significant addition to 6:2 is **לא** before **ישליטנו** and **האלהים** after it, thus emphasising the importance of what God does not enable in this verse as opposed to what he does enable in 5:18. The final clause in each of the verses give appropriately contrasting responses to this situation, **זה מתת האלהים** in 5:18 being replaced in 6:2 by **הבל וחלי רע**.

What precisely **כי לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו** in v.19 is intended to convey is unclear - perhaps intentionally so. It could refer back to **מספר ימי-חיו** in v.17, and indicate that one will not dwell on the brevity of life because (s)he is fully occupied with the joy that God gives and does not brood on the problems life poses. This is a highly optimistic view of life<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, it might be read as the deeply cynical comment of someone whose outlook is decidedly pessimistic - God gives 'joy' as a panacea, or as Gordis puts it (1968:255), a narcotic, which deadens one's awareness of the tribulations of life. However, he seems only to give it to a chosen (arbitrarily chosen?) few. In this case, the repeated mention of God's giving 5:17,18 is deeply ironic. We might recall that a similar question arises in relation to 2:24-26, which also starts with a 'call to enjoyment' verse, has a play on the word **טוב**, and focuses on what God gives.

<sup>18</sup>Lohfink (1990:634) proposes an even more optimistic reading whereby the joy given in 5:19 'must be something like divine revelation. When we experience joy at least in one small moment, we come in touch with that sense of things which normally God alone sees.'

The second half of the verse does little to explicate it. The ambiguity of the first half is exacerbated by the word **מענה** from a root **ענה**, because it could be one of four roots - as we noted in relation to **ענין** in 1:13. 'Be occupied, busied' is the choice of most commentators<sup>19</sup>, which makes good sense in the context, but gives a rather different nuance to the way it is usually understood in 1:13 and 3:10. However, while 'afflicts him with joy in his heart' may seem a strange turn of phrase, it captures something of the irony of the passage read as the work of a skeptic. Thus Crenshaw (1988:125) suggests, 'Perhaps both nuances are present, for preoccupation with pleasure is vexing to those who are unable to participate in the good life.' 'Answers him with joy in his heart' is also a possible reading, as Gordis (1968:255-6) argues<sup>20</sup>. The verbal form **מענה** is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible<sup>21</sup>, but there is a noun **מענה** meaning 'answer, response' which is used in Job and Prov.<sup>22</sup>. In Prov 15:23, **שמחה** and **מענה** are linked, 16:1 mentions an answer from God; and the sentiments of 16:4, **כל פעל יהוה למענהו וגם-רשע ליום רעה**, are also pertinent.

The interpretation of 5:19 is very important, because it has a major bearing not only on the way 5:17,18 is understood, but also on all the other verses which issue the 'call to enjoyment'. The ambiguity of the verse allows the reader to view it either as the positive reaction of someone who rejoices in God's good gifts described in 5:17,18 and in the other 'call to enjoyment' verses, or as the ironic response of a skeptic.

<sup>19</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:133-4); Eaton (1983:104); Fox (1989:218); Ogden (1987:87); Whitley (1979:56); Whybray (1989:103).

<sup>20</sup>Lohfink (1987:240) translates, 'To every human question he provides the answer in joy.' He goes on to say, 'This appears to me to be one of the most profound statements Qoheleth makes.' Lohfink elaborates this reading in a later article (1990). For example, he asks (p.630),

Are we really so sure that Qoheleth and his reader had the same feeling for distinct homonymic roots as we have? They had not learned Hebrew with dictionaries like those by Gesenius or Brown-Driver-Briggs. Did they not rather, where we assume different homonymic roots, perceive one single word with sometimes very different meanings?

<sup>21</sup>If **מענה** is a verb, however it is rendered, it might be expected to display a third person pronominal suffix - **מענהו**, 'God occupies/afflicts/answers *him*'. Indeed, most commentators (e.g., Fox (1989:218); Gordis (1968:256); Whitley (1979:56); Whybray (1989:103)) and the BHS follow LXX, Targ and Syr in repointing the MT to give this reading.

<sup>22</sup>Job 32:3,5; Prov 15:1,23; 16:1,4; 29:19. Also once elsewhere in Mic 3:7.



## 11.1.5 6:1-2

The opening of 6:1 clearly indicates that there is a move away from the positive tone (at least superficially) of 5:17-19, and back to the negativity of 5:12-16. It does this by recalling the first few words of 5:12,

יש רעה חולה ראיתי תחת השמש	5:12
יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש	6:1

The two verses are also the same length, ten words.

There is an element of ambiguity in the second half 6:1 concerning the meaning of the word רבה. Its use here is ironic in light of the clause כי לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו at the end of 5:17-19, and this in turn plays on the use of the same word in the clause וכעס הרבה וחליו וקצף at the end of 5:12-16, which picks up on the phrase יאכל הרבה at the end of 5:9-11. Most commentators<sup>23</sup> read the word in 6:1 as 'great', and interpret the clause something along the lines of 'it is a considerable burden to people.' However, the word might indicate number and be rendered 'prevalent' in this verse, 'it is prevalent among people.' Both senses are appropriate in the context, and perhaps it should be conceded with Whybray (1989a:104), 'this Hebrew expression (*rab 'al*) ... is unusual, and its meaning is not certain.' The same issue arises in 8:6 where רבה is used in a similar way, כי-רעת האדם רבה עליו.

The most striking aspect of 6:2 is, as we have already seen, the similarity to 5:18 that highlights the differences by which it totally turns on its head the positive tone of that verse. We noted that the first difference between the two is the use of איש to replace כל-האדם. This may seem unimportant, but it might indicate that a specific individual is in mind in contrast to the generality 'humankind' which the terms כל-האדם in 5:18 and על-האדם in 6:1 may convey. In 6:2 this man may be someone the author knows, or the author himself, or perhaps even the reader (which rather assumes that the reader is male!). In this regard, the sentiments in 2:21-23 about wealth being passed on to someone who does not work for it, should be recalled. 6:2 takes this a step further by explicitly stating that a 'stranger' enjoys the man's wealth.

The second difference between 5:18 and 6:2 is the extra words placed between ונכסים and the verb שלט:

והשליטו	נתן-לו האלהים עשר ונכסים	5:18
ישליטבו	וכבוד ואיננו חסר לנפשו מכל אשר-יתאוה ולא-	יתן-לו האלהים עשר ונכסים 6:2

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:134); Crenshaw (1988:126); Eaton (1983:104-5); Fox (1989:219).

ולא is the key word in the verse which reverses the sentiments of the whole verse. It is the first word of the second half of the verse which is decidedly negative, where the first half appears to be very positive:

איש אשר יתן-לו האלהים עשר ונכסים וכבוד ואיננו חסר לנפשו מכל אשר-יתאוה  
ולא-ישליטנו האלהים לאכל ממנו כי איש נכרי יאכלנו זה הבל וחלי רע הוא

By contrast, וחשליטו לאכל ממנו lies precisely at the centre of 5:18, and what follows it is positive.

The word כבוד may recall what Solomon did not ask for, but which God gave him anyway, according to 2 Chr 1:11,12,

ויאמר אלהים לשלמה ... לא-שאלת עשר נכסים וכבוד ... ועשר ונכסים וכבוד אתן-לך  
לא-היה כן למלכים אשר לפניך ואחריו לא יהיה-כן

However, there may also be a play on the meaning of the verb כבד, 'to be burdensome', picking up on the ambiguity over ורבה in 6:1, and Salters (1979:283) contends that 'it can also mean "riches, wealth, abundance" as in Ps 49<sup>17</sup> Prov 3<sup>16</sup> 8<sup>18</sup> Is 10<sup>3</sup> 61<sup>6</sup> 66<sup>12</sup> etc; hence it must be considered at least a possibility.' One consequence of the addition of וכבוד is that it emphasises that this man has been given everything described in 5:17 *and more*. Moreover, the rest of the additional words stress that he wanted for absolutely nothing - as opposed to the person described in 5:13,14 who had absolutely nothing. This makes the reversal in the second half of the verse all the more effective - the key element, the ability to enjoy it all, was denied him by God. It was given instead to someone else, making 6:2 highly reminiscent of 2:26, ולחוטא נתן ענין לאסוף ולכנוס לתת לטוב לפני האלהים. As in 2:26, the question this raises is 'on what grounds does God enable one person to enjoy his/her wealth, but deny that ability to another?' In both cases the positive response might be that it is the 'good' who receive the ability to enjoy - perhaps those who accept what they have as the gift of God; but the negative response might be that it is simply the 'fortunate' who benefit from God's arbitrary choice.

#### 11.1.6 6:3-6

6:3 is constructed similarly to v.2 in that the first part of the verse seems very positive, but is reversed in the second half. The verse opens by describing a man who has a hundred children - and children were considered to be a great blessing, as, for example, Ps 127:3-5 makes clear:



הנה נחלת יהוה בנים שכר פרי הבטן  
כחצים ביד-גבור כן בני הנעורים  
אשרי הגבר אשר מלא את-אשפתו מהם

It then goes on twice to describe the many years the man lives - long life also being regarded as a great blessing<sup>24</sup>, and being something else which, according to 2 Chr 1:11 Solomon did not ask God for. Explanations have been sought to explain away the apparently needless repetition. Thus Gordis (1968:258) argues that 'וְרַב שִׁיָּהוּ' introduces a concessive idea, "however many the days of his years may be", and Eaton (1983:105) suggests that we read רַב as 'great [in reputation]' and renders this part of the verse, 'If a man lives many years, and is great as are the years of his life.' However, the use of two words from the root רבה may well be intentionally ambiguous, playing on its use elsewhere in 5:7-6:9. Also the repeated use of the word שָׁנִים, which is picked up again in the clause in 6:6, וְאֵלֶּיךָ שָׁנִים פְּעָמִים, emphasises the man's life in contrast to the stillborn who never lives. V.3 is constructed in such a way that this contrast forms the climax to the verse following the reversal half way through:

if a man has many children  
and lives many years  
and many/great are the days of his life  
but finds no satisfaction (in his life)  
and has not a proper burial (at the end of his life)  
then the one who has no life is better off than he

The contrast is also portrayed in a literary way in the reversal from מֵ-טוֹב to מֵ-הַטּוֹבָה, where both words function differently.

The phrase וְגַם-קְבוּרָה לֹא-הִיָּתָה לוֹ seems rather odd here. From a thematic perspective, it introduces an extra element to the argument which seems to serve no useful purpose - although we have suggested that from a structural point of view it is part of the balance of the verse. It seems to weaken the argument because it adds a complicating factor which detracts from the force of the observation that God does not permit this man to enjoy all he has. Without it the contrast would have been between *all* these tremendous blessings and the one factor of the man's inability to find satisfaction which destroys the value of everything else<sup>25</sup>. It is worth noting that the only other mention of burial in Qohelet, in 8:10, is also rather odd.

<sup>24</sup>See, e.g., Gen 25:8; Exod 20:12; Job 42:17; Prov 28:16.

<sup>25</sup>Crenshaw (1988:126-7) argues that the phrase is an anticipation of the fate of the stillborn. Cf Schoors (1992:134).

The verbs בּוֹא and הָלַךְ in 6:4 recall their use in 5:14,15, and again they appear to signify birth and death. הוֹלֵךְ is used in connection with death again in v.6. The use twice of the word בַּחֲשֹׁךְ also recalls its use in the clause גַּם כָּל-יָמָיו בַּחֲשֹׁךְ יֹאכֵל in 5:16. חֲשֹׁךְ in 6:4 probably indicates something like 'obscurity'. However, again like 5:14-16, it is not clear to whom 6:4 refers, the man or the stillborn. Fox (1989:220) argues that 'the subject of this verse is the toiler not the stillbirth because the latter does not have a name,' but while the verse might very appropriately be applied to the obscurity into which the name of a man with many children and long life disappears after his death, it could also be a metaphorical way of saying that the name of the stillborn was never known. 6:5 seems to refer to the stillborn, but there may be a link between גַּם כָּל-יָמָיו בַּחֲשֹׁךְ יֹאכֵל here and גַּם-שָׁמֶשׁ לֹא-רָאָה וְלֹא יָדַע in 5:16, in which case the verse might apply to the man. 6:6 certainly refers to the man and says of him, וְטוֹבָה לֹא רָאָה, playing on לֹא-רָאָה in v.5, and the two different senses of טוֹב in v.3. Thus there is again considerable ambiguity over precisely who is being described in vv.4,5, and it may be that the words רָאָה and טוֹב are applied in different ways to both the stillborn and the man. In this respect it should be recalled that 5:17 starts, הִנֵּה אֲשֶׁר-רָאִיתִי טוֹב, and one of the things that is seen to be good and/or beautiful (or appropriate) is לְרֵאוֹת טוֹבָה.

6:5 also states that he (whoever 'he' is) does 'not know', but it is not clear *what* is not known. It could be that he does not know, or has not known the sun, but this makes little sense. The implication may be that he does not know *anything*, although this is not explicitly stated: the verb יָדַע does seem sometimes to bear the sense 'to have knowledge'<sup>26</sup> so that it could be rendered here 'he does not have knowledge.' Or perhaps the *athnah* is misleading and it is 'rest' he does not know. This would give a very different reading of the verse, which would further the ambiguity about who it refers to: 'He does not see the sun, and does not know rest', rather than 'He does not see the sun or have knowledge.' Certainly the final clause as pointed in the MT is awkward because there is no conjunction introducing נַחַת, giving a very abrupt ending to the verse. Moreover, it is highly ambiguous because it is not clear who is referred to by either of the occurrences of the demonstrative pronoun זֶה.

טוֹב מְלֵא כֶף נַחַת מִמֶּלֶא חֲפָנִים עֵמֶל, 4:6, is ironic because it could mean 'rest' as in 4:6, טוֹב מְלֵא כֶף נַחַת מִמֶּלֶא חֲפָנִים עֵמֶל, or 'quietness' as in 9:17, דְּבַרֵּי חֲכָמִים בְּנַחַת נִשְׁמָעִים מִזַּעֲקַת מוֹשֵׁל בְּכַסִּילִים, or it may be that it is

<sup>26</sup>E.g., Isa 44:9; Ps 73:22.



being used metaphorically of 'death' as in Job 17:16 where it is used in parallel with Sheol, **בדי שאל תרדנה אם-יחד על-עפר נחת**. There is also another noun **נחת** meaning 'descent'. The irony is heightened by the final clause of 6:6 which indicates that ultimately all end up in the same place anyway, **הלא אל-מקום אחד הכל הולך**. This picks up on the consideration of the fate of people and animals in 3:18-21, but reverses the word order:

3:20      הכל הולך אל-מקום אחד

6:6      אל-מקום אחד הכל הולך

'Reversal' is a key element not only in this verse, but also in 6:3-6, and indeed in 6:1-6. We noted the reversal of the sentiments of 5:17a in 6:1a and of 5:18 in 6:2. We outlined the reversal of the fortunes of the man in v.3, as well as the reversal from **מן-הטובה** to **טוב ממנו**. And there is also a reversal of the man's apparent advantage over the stillborn.

6:6 is somewhat peculiar, because it opens with a protasis, but instead of the expected apodosis it concludes with a question. This may serve two purposes. Firstly it draws attention to the question, and secondly it leaves a gap for the reader to fill in - what apodosis would the reader expect in light of the things the author has been considering in the preceding verses?

### 11.1.7      6:7-9

6:7-9 forms the conclusion to 5:7-6:9, but also to the first half of the book. **כל-עמל** in 6:7 picks up on a major theme of the first six chapters, which occurs much less often later in Qohelet (**עמל** is used thirty times in the first half of the book, but only five times in the second half). **עמל** is a particular focus of the second half of ch.2, but it may be that, along with the near-synonym **עשה**, it is *the* main theme of the first half of the book, much of which is observation of the things people do, and a search to find what advantage such deeds bring, or what 'good' there is in them.

The clause **כל-עמל האדם לפיהו** in 6:7 picks up on **ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה** in 5:10, though the word **עמל** does not appear there. The second half of the verse, **וגם-הנפש לא תמלא**, then reiterates sentiments found in 5:9, so that 5:9,10 and 6:7 form something of an inclusio. Similar sentiments are also found in 4:8 and 6:3, although expressed using a different verb to 6:7:

ואין קץ לכל-עמלו גם-עיניו לא-תשבע עשר	4:8
אהב כסף לא-ישבע כסף	5:9
ונפשו לא-תשבע מן-הטובה	6:3

לא-תשבע and לא-תמלא occur together in 1:8, though in that verse neither explicitly refers to wealth, לא-תשבע עין לראות ולא-תמלא און משמע. Stronger sentiments regarding 'work/wealth' are found in 2:18, ושנאתי אני את-כל-עמלי, and 2:20, וסבותי אני ליאש את-לבי על-כל-העמל.

6:7, and the other verses like it, may constitute part of the response to the question in 1:3, מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו. However, there seems to be another perspective presented mostly in the first half, but also once in the second half of the book:

מכל-עמלי	לבי שמח	2:10
ב-עמלו	והראה את-נפשו טוב	2:24
בכל-עמלו	וראה טוב	3:13
בכל-עמלו	ולראות טובה	5:17
ב-עמלו	ולשמח	5:18
ב-עמלו והוא ילוננו	ולשמוח	8:15

Typically, none of these is identical, but they fall into two groups using similar words: either enjoying work, or seeing good/seeing wealth/finding enjoyment in work. The second group is ambiguous because it may or may not mean the same as the first.

To demonstrate the importance of the roots עמל and עשה in the first half of Qohelet, we might catalogue their use throughout these six chapters. In this respect, the question in 1:3, מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל, may well be programmatic for the first half of the book. In 1:4-11, the link between the natural cycles and the human sphere is made at least partly by the line in v.9, מה-שהיה הוא שיהיה ומה-שנעשה הוא שיעשה. The inclusio to 1:12-2:3 is the phrase המעשים/המעשה שנעשה/שנעשו תחת השמש in 1:13; 2:3; אשר נעשה/יעשו תחת השמים then serves as the inclusio for the three sections which make up 1:12-2:19 (i.e., B,C,B'). The centre of this chiasmus, 2:4-10, focuses very heavily on the deeds performed by the author him-/herself, which are introduced by the words הגדלתי מעשי. This is picked up by two occurrences of מכל-עמלי at the end of that section, and the link between עשה and עמל is firmly established by the line בכל-מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות in 2:11. The inclusio to 2:11-19 is ב[כל]-עמל שעמלתי. עמל is then clearly an important aspect of 2:20-26, particularly in the contrast drawn between וסבותי אני ליאש את-לבי על-כל-העמל שעמלתי in v.21, and והראה את-נפשו טוב בעמלו in v.24. 3:1-8 mentions neither עמל nor עשה, but v.9, which links this poem to the following discussion, uses both, מה-יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל. In 3:9-22 the contrast between מעשה performed by God, and מעשה performed by people is a central



concern. 4:1-3 focuses on **העשקים אשר נעשים**, and the phrase **אשר נעשים/נעשה תהת השמש** forms an inclusio to these verses. In 4:4 Qohelet observes **את-כל-עמל** and arrives at the conclusion, **כל-כשרון המעשה כי הוא קנאת-איש מרעהו**. The section 4:4-6 concludes with the words, **טוב מלא כף נחת ממלא חפנים עמל**. 4:8-12 explicitly considers **עמל**, pointing out that it is more fruitful for two people than one. 4:12-16 again mentions neither **עמל** nor **עשה**, but may indicate that no matter what one *does* (s)he will still not be remembered. **עשה** occurs at the beginning and end of 4:17-5:6, and this section focuses on what one *does* before God. 5:7-11 again does not mention either **עשה** or **עמל**, but it is the value of the fruit of one's work that is under consideration. There is a contrast between fruitless work in 5:12-16, using the phrases **ומאומה לא-ישא בעמלו** in v.14 and **שיעמל לרוח** in v.15, and enjoyable or fruitful work in 5:17-19, using **ולראה טובה בכל-עמלו שיעמל** in v.17 and **ולשמה בעמלו** in v.18. This contrast is developed in 6:1-2 and 3-6, although neither term is used. Perhaps the contrast is at its sharpest here, because the comparison is made between a person who lacks nothing (s)he desire - including wealth, possessions, honour, many children and long life - and a stillborn who can neither work nor do anything else.

Returning to 6:7, we should note that the pronominal suffix on **לפיהו** may readily be taken as a reference to **האדם** earlier in the verse. However, it could refer back to **מקום אחד** in the previous verse. If this expression is a euphemism for Sheol, then the sentiments of the verse are similar to Isa 5:14, **לכן הרחיבה שאול נפשה ופערה פיה לבלי-חק**, and Prov 27:20, **שאול ואבדה לא תשבענה ועיני האדם לא תשבענה**. This makes the use of the verb **מלא** in 6:7 particularly appropriate, as also the use of **שבע** elsewhere. The picture of people endlessly working simply in the end to satisfy (or fail to satisfy) Sheol's appetite seems to fit the context well, as also does the idea of people working simply to satisfy their own appetites - sentiments found also in Prov 16:26, **נפש עמל עמלה לו כי אכף עליו פיהו**. Perhaps, then, we should conclude with Crenshaw (1988:128) that 'Qoheleth may have crafted his syntax to invite both interpretations.' This makes a fitting conclusion to the consideration of various aspects of human work in the first half of Qohelet.

Where **מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמל שיעמל** in 1:3 forms a fitting introduction to a/the key theme in the first half of the book, perhaps **מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל** in 6:8, while picking up a theme only briefly touched on in the first half (in 1:12-2:3 and 2:11-19,20-26), also anticipates

one of the main themes of the second half of the book. The reader may have been led to the conclusion that the issue had been resolved in the two statements **יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות** in 2:13, and **אין זכרון לחכם עם-הכסיל לעולם**, but it is thrown wide open again by this question in 6:8.

Where **עמל** and **עשה** seem to be used as near-synonyms in the first half of the book, there is also a close connection between **חכם** and **ידע**, and this is developed by the second question in 6:8, **מה-לעני ידע להלך נגד החיים**. As we suggested earlier, wisdom and knowledge are very important aspects of the second half of Qohelet, perhaps together they form *the* major theme of this part of the book.

There are a number of difficulties for translation of the second half of 6:8. The first concerns the word **לעני**. **עני** occurs often in the Hebrew Bible as an adjective meaning 'poor, afflicted, humble', and this is how most commentators understand it here<sup>27</sup>. It would then tie in with the poor but wise youth in 4:13, and the poor wise man in 9:15 - neither of whom seemed ultimately to gain any advantage for themselves or anyone else. By contrast, 7:11 states, **טובה חכמה עם-נחלה ויתר לראי השמש**, which may imply that wisdom does bring advantage when it is accompanied by wealth.

However, Whitley (1979:59) argues that **לעני** comes from the root meaning 'to answer', saying, 'It would thus appear that in Koh 6:8 **עני** conceals some such term as **ענה** "a shrewd or intelligent speaker", which serves as a parallel to **חכם**.' And Loader (1986:69) suggests that **לעני** should be emended to **לאני** - 'to me'. Both these possibilities make good sense in the context, but are unnecessary when the usual rendering ties in so well with other parts of the book.

The next difficulty concerns the fact that there is no equivalent in the second half of the verse to **יותר** in the first half. It may be that the sense carries over from **מה-יותר ל-** in the first half<sup>28</sup>, 5:9 offering a possible precedent:

כי מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל 6:8  
מה-[יותר] לעני יודע להלך נגד החיים

אהב כסף לא-ישבע כסף 5:9  
ומי אהב בהמון לא [ישבע] תבואה

<sup>27</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:126); Crenshaw (1988:120); Fox (1989:221); Gordis (1968:260-1); Ogden (1987:95).

<sup>28</sup>So, e.g., Schoors (1992:165-6).



In both instances there are two balanced halves of five words each when the key word is omitted from the second half. 7:1 offers another parallel,

טוב שם משמן טוב  
ו[טוב]-יום המות מיום הולדו

And, although it does not display the same balance, 9:16-18 may provide a further example:

טובה חכמה מגבורה וחכמה המסכן בזויה ודבריו אינם ושמעים  
[טובה] דברי חכמים בנחת נשמעים מזעקת מושל בכסילים  
טובה חכמה מכל קרב וחוטא אחד יאבד טובה הרבה

Alternatively מה-לעני might be read as 'what *is there* for the poor'.

The next problem concerns the word יודע. It seems to modify העני, 'the poor *who know*', but it ought then to take the article. Barton (1912:135) suggests that the MT pointing of לעני should be disregarded, because if this term is indefinite יודע is more appropriate. However, if the accents are ignored, this second half of the verse is grammatically correct if it is read, 'what [advantage] is there for the poor? (S)he knows how to go before the living.' If it is read this way, then the force of מה-לעני may be to add to the comparison in the first half thus: 'What advantage is there for the wise person - even if (s)he is poor - over the foolish person?' The rest of the verse gives the answer. In this case, 6:8 would express sentiments very similar to 2:13,14,

מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל	6:8a
יש יתרון לחכמה מן-הסכלות כיתרון האור מן-החשך	2:13

מה-לעני יודע להלך נגד החיים	6:8b
החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולך	2:14

2:14 also ties in with 6:9,

החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולך	2:14
טוב מראה עינים	6:9
מהלך נפש	

The meaning of the phrase להלך נגד החיים, with which 6:8 closes, is unclear. The closest parallel to the use of נגד is Prov 14:7, לך מנגד לאיש כסיל ובל-ידעת שפתי-דעת, where it seems to be synonymous with לפני. If it is rendered in this way here, the clause might mean either '(s)he knows how to handle life' or '(s)he knows how to conduct him- or herself before the living.' However, in view of the use of הלך in connection with death in 5:14,15; 6:4,6, there may be an ironic twist to the phrase - '(s)he knows how to die'! There certainly seems to

be a play on the word הלך in the next verse, הלך-נפש, and the unusual form of הלך in both verses may draw attention to this<sup>29</sup>. The sentiments would then tie in with the irony of 9:4,5,

כי-מי אשר יבחר אל כל-החיים יש בטחון כי לכלב חי הוא טוב מן-האריה המת  
כי החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אים יודעים מאומה

There might also be a connection with the assertion in 8:5 that עת ומשפט ידע לב חכם.

The expression הלך-נפש in 6:9 is usually rendered something like 'the wandering of desire'<sup>30</sup>. As we noted above, נפש is used a number of times in Qohelet to denote the seat of one's appetites or desires, but elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it often seems to indicate the 'living being' - that is to say, if הנפש is removed so is the life of the person or animal<sup>31</sup>. Combining this with the connection earlier between הלך and death, the phrase might be translated 'the passing of life'. This is how Loader (1986:69-70); Whitley (1979:60) and Whybray (1989:109) understand it. There is precedent for such a reading in Gen 35:18, where we read, ויהי בצאת נפשה כי כתה. Probably the phrase is deliberately ambiguous so that it can be read in different ways.

מראה עינים, the sight of the eyes, is usually taken by extension to indicate those things that are concrete and can be easily obtained, as opposed to the cravings of a 'wandering appetite or desire'. It is noteworthy that this is described as טוב here, because 1:8 states that לא-תשבע עין לראות; in 2:10 the author says, וכל אשר שאלו עיני לא אצלתי מהם, but the conclusion in 2:11 is ונהנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש; 4:8 describes a person who ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה ומה-כשרון לבעליה כי אם-ראית עיניו; 5:10 states עיניו לא-תשבע עשר. However, at the end of the book the sight of the eyes is regarded more positively: 11:7 states, הלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך, and in 11:9 exhorts the reader, וטוב לעינים לראות את-השמש. It may be in these last two instances that 'sight' is a metaphor for life: certainly 'seeing the sun' seems to be used in this way in 7:11 and 11:7, and conversely 'not seeing the sun' is used in 6:5 of the stillborn who does not have life. 'Life and death' is a theme that has been touched on a few times so far (1:4?; 2:14-16; 3:2,18-21; 4:2-3; 5:13-15; 6:3-6), and continues to be an important aspect of the rest of the book (7:1,2,4,8?,16,17; 8:5,6,8,10; 9:2-6,12?) culminating in the depiction of approaching death in 12:1-7. The two phrases מראה עינים and הלך נפש may allude to this theme.

<sup>29</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:94-5).

<sup>30</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:136); Eaton (1983:107); Fox (1989:223); Gordis (1968:261-2); Ogden (1987:95).

<sup>31</sup>See, e.g., Gen 9:4,5; Lev 17:10,11,12,14; Deut 12:23,24; etc.



This short passage clearly picks up on a number of themes from the first half of Qohelet: the inability of work/wealth to bring satisfaction; the advantage, or lack of advantage, of wisdom over wealth; knowing how to conduct one's life (i.e., what it is 'good' to do); the sight of one's eyes; and the wandering of one's desires. But, while dying is not specifically referred to, *all* of these may be subtle allusions to death. V.7 may allude to Sheol's endless appetite. V.8a may pick up from 2:11-19 the fact that any advantage of wisdom over folly is eliminated by death. V.8b may be a reference to those who know how to die. V.9a may affirm that life is better than death. The two levels of the text here make it highly appropriate as a conclusion to the first half of the book, because it ties in important themes from chs.1-6 to the subject of death, which is where the second half (before the epilogue) also ends.

## 11.2 Conclusions

A key aspect of the ambiguity in 5:7-6:9 concerns the difficulty in discerning how the verses at the beginning and end of the section relate to each other, to the rest of this section, and to the sections either side. As a result, it is probably impossible to state with any certainty where the passage begins and ends, and precisely how it ties in with what precedes and follows it. Hence, the structure proposed for these verses must at best be tentative. Of course, this is further complicated by the multiple ways in which the passage even as we have divided it might be structured. We suggested three ways in which the structure might operate<sup>32</sup>, each of which gives it a different slant.

Another key source of ambiguity in this section is the use of wordplay. Of prime importance in this respect are the words טוב and רע: the whole passage revolves round the question of what is 'good' and what is 'bad' - and just what we mean by these terms anyway. In this way it follows on well from 4:1-5:6, and anticipates the theme of 7:1-8:8. An important feature of the last part of the passage, 6:7-9, is the plays on words which allude to life and death: הלך-נפש, מראה עינים, החיים, חלך, הנפש, לפיהו, and the connection between the first half of v.8, כי מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל, and 2:11-19 where death is explicitly discussed. Other

<sup>32</sup>Cf Fredericks (1989).

words on whose meaning the author plays include אכל, שבע, רבב/רבה, נוח, אשר, יפה, and מענה.

In addition to a large number of minor ambiguities, we note again in 5:7-6:9 ambiguity over the antecedent of pronominal suffixes, and ambiguity concerning the author's attitude to God. In particular, 5:17-19 may be read as a beacon of hope shining out in the middle of an otherwise gloomy passage, or it may be interpreted as deeply ironic, providing a launching pad for the hopelessness expressed in 6:1-6.



CHAPTER 12, The Introduction to the Second Half of the Book (6:10-12)

12.1 Commentary

If Qohelet divides into two halves around the last part of 6:9, גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח, then 6:10-12 may function as an introduction to the second half of the book. However, the matter is not so straightforward. We noted that 6:7-9a picks up on themes from the first half of the book while also anticipating themes in the second half, and 6:10-12 does likewise. The first half of v.10 reflects sentiments found also in 1:9 and 3:15:

1:9	מה-שהיה	הוא שיהיה
3:15	מה-שהיה כבר	הוא
6:10	מה-שהיה כבר	נקרא שמו

These sentiments are not repeated later in the book, where the expression מה-יהיה takes over. However, just as מה-שהיה occurs once in the first half of the book, so מה-שהיה occurs once in the second half, in 7:24, but the sentiments of this verse are more in line with the verses using the phrases מה-שהיה,

3:22	מי יביאנו לראות	במה-שהיה	אחריו
6:12	מי יגיד לאדם	מה- יהיה	אחריו
7:24	רחוק	מה-ש-היה ועמק עמק	מי ימצאנו
8:7	איננו ידע	מה-שהיה	מי יגיד לו
10:14	לא-ידע האדם	מה-שהיה	מי יגיד לו
11:2	לא-תדע	מה- יהיה	מאחריו

The use of לא-יוכל in the second part of v.10 relates to verses in both halves of the book. However, while it is not explicitly stated in the first half that human inability is related to what God does, this is clearly stated in the second half:

1:8	כל-הדברים יגעים לא-יוכל איש לדבר
1:15	מעות לא-יוכל לתקן וחסרון לא-יוכל להמות
6:10	ולא-יוכל לדין עם שהתקיף ממנו
7:13	ראה את-מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו
8:17	וראיתי את-כל-מעשה האלהים כי לא-יוכל האדם למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש
8:17	...וגם אם-יאמר החכם לדעת לא-יוכל למצא

This may well have a bearing on how the word שהתקיף in 6:10 is understood.

The reference to ‘many words’ in v.11 recalls the discussion in 4:17-5:6 of the danger of saying too much. 6:11 bears a particularly close connection with 5:6:

5:6	כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים הרבה כי...
6:11	כי יש-דברים הרבה מרבים הבל מה-יתר לאדם כי...

Besides the fact that both use an identical expression which occurs nowhere else in the book, **דברים הרבה**, both also contain a reference to much **הבל**, and both start with **כי** and are followed by **כי** used in a different way. The theme of excessive speech is picked up again in 10:12-15, where a similar expression occurs, **ירבה דברים**; and 8:1-7 also focuses on 'words'.

We have already noted that **מה-יתר לאדם** at the end of v.11 picks up on a key question from the first half of the book:

	מה-יתרון לאדם ב-	1:3
	מה-יתרון העושה באשר הוא	3:9
	מה-יתרון לו	5:15
	מה-יותר ל-	6:8
	מה-יתר לאדם	6:11
כל-עמלו		
עמל		
שיעמל לרוח		
חכם מן-הכסיל		

This question is not asked again, but **יתרון** (7:12; 10:10,11), **יותר** (7:16); and **יתר** (7:11; 12:9,12) all occur in later chapters.

The first half of v.12 recalls 2:3,

מספר ימי חייהם	האדם אשר יעשו תחת השמים	אי-זה טוב לבני	עד אשר-אראה	2:3
מספר ימי-חיי	בחיים	אדם	מה-טוב ל-	6:12

The phrase at the end of these lines occurs also in 5:17, but nowhere in the later chapters. We have seen that 'what is good' is a key element in the section 4:1-5:6, and it is also very important in 7:1-8:8.

The second half of v.12 is the second of the phrases asserting human inability to know the future. Because 'what is good' is so important in 7:1-8:8, and in view of these verses about human inability to know the future, which is a key theme of the second half of Qohelet, 6:12 might be taken as the introduction 'proper' to ch.7 in particular and the second half of the book in general, perhaps serving as the second half counterpart to the question in 1:3.

A number of commentators<sup>1</sup> contend that v.10 as punctuated in the MT, in the words of Gordis (1968:263), 'does violence to Hebrew style,' and conclude that **אדם** should be taken with the second half of the verse. The *waw* on **ולא-יוכל** is then understood to be asseverative<sup>2</sup>, emphasising human inability in the face of one stronger than they are. It is true that on a number of occasions the accents in the MT seem to hinder rather than aid understanding of the text of Qohelet, but it is also true that grammatical norms are not always adhered to - especially when, as may be the case in 6:10, some particular emphasis is achieved by an unusual con-

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:130); Fox (1989:224); Gordis (1968:263); Whitley (1979:61).

<sup>2</sup>See Schoors (1992:124-8) on the emphatic use of the *waw*.



struction. If אדם is taken with the second part of the verse, the first part might be rendered, 'That which is has already been named, and it is known what it is.' If אדם<sup>3</sup> is read with the first part as pointed in the MT, it might be translated something like, 'That which is has already been named - and it is known that he is man'. The main problem with the latter is that there is no logical or grammatical antecedent for הוא; however, it does give a perfect balance between v.10a (9 words, 30 consonants) and v.11 (9 words, 30 consonants), revolving round the statement in v.10b:

מה-שהיה כבר נקרא שמו ונודע אשר-הוא אדם  
ולא-יוכל לדין עם שהתקיף ממנו  
כי יש-דברים הרבה מרבים הבל מה-יתר לאדם

This places a particular emphasis on the 'one who is stronger' at the centre, contrasted with אדם at the end of the first and last lines. אדם then features in the two questions in v.12, giving one statement and three questions about him/her:

אדם	ונודע אשר-הוא
לאדם	מה-יתר
לאדם	מי-יודע מה-טוב
לאדם	מה-יהיה אחריו

If the whole of the first half of v.10 is included, it becomes clear that the author is playing on the use of מה-:

ומה-שהיה כבר נקרא שמו נודע אשר-הוא אדם	
מה-יתר לאדם	
מה-טוב לאדם	מי-יודע
מה-יהיה אחריו	מי יגיד לאדם

From a positive affirmation about 'that which is', or 'that which has been'<sup>4</sup>, the passage progresses to ever greater uncertainty, drawing in key issues from the first half: מה-שהיה relating perhaps to what the author has observed; מה-יתר picking up the question found first in the introduction to Qohelet, and again in 3:9; 5:15 and 6:8; and מה-טוב reflecting the author's search initiated in 2:1-3. It then concludes with a, or perhaps *the* key issue to be explored in the second half, מה-יהיה. The positive affirmation about 'what is/has been' is thus drawn in contrast with the uncertainty over 'what is to be'.

The word שהתקיף in v.10b is anomalous because there is no vowel marked beneath the *he*. It could be pointed to render it either as an adjective with the article or as a hiphil form of

<sup>3</sup>אדם is rendered by Isaksson (1987:85-8) by the name Adam. He sees a reference here to Gen.

<sup>4</sup>It is translated in the present tense by, e.g., Isaksson (1987:85-8); Schoors (1992:173); Whitley (1979:60).

the verb *תקף*. The *qere* renders it as an adjective, but the *ketibh* seems to be a conflation of two variants, *שתקיף* and *התקיף*, which would both give much the same sense and either of which would be more appropriate than the word *שהתקיף*, however it is pointed<sup>5</sup>. However, Whitley (1979:61) suggests that *שהתקיף* is an abbreviation of *שהוא תקיף* - which actually gives the same sense as *שתקיף* and *התקיף*. The same issue arises over *כשהסכל* in 10:36.

More important in terms of the interpretation of 6:10 is who or what the one that 'is stronger than he' might represent. It might simply indicate anyone who is stronger, or it might relate back to the oppressors in 4:1, or to the high officials in 5:7. It might also point forward to the king in 8:2-4 of whom it is said, *כל-אשר יחפץ יעשה*, and *מי יאמר-לו מה-תעשה*; or to the great king described in 9:13-15 who besieged a little city. However, while all of these are possible, there may also be an allusion to God, particularly as the verb *דין* is often used in the Hebrew Bible of God. This would tie in with the sentiments expressed in 3:14, *ידעתי כי כל-אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם עליו אין להוסיף וממנו אין לגרע*, and also 7:13, *ראה את-מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו*. It may be that the author is playing on the biblical meaning of the verb *דין*, 'to judge', and the meaning it developed in later Hebrew, similar to that of *ריב*, 'to dispute, contend'. Perhaps also Job is in mind, providing an excellent example of a person who made a futile attempt to contend with one who was stronger than he. A further possibility, particularly in light of 6:7-9, is that it represents death which no one has the power to elude.

The word *דברים* in v.11 is ambiguous, because here, as elsewhere, it could be translated either as 'words' or 'things'. The statement 'there are many "things" that increase *hebel*' is highly appropriate in a book where the phrases *גם-זה הבל* and *הכל הבל* occur frequently. However, the statement 'there are many "words" that increase *hebel*' might pick up the theme of the previous verse about human inability to contend with someone stronger, implying that no amount of words will change the situation. Again this may recall Job's speeches addressed to God, and also ties in with the sentiments in 4:17-5:6, and perhaps 8:1-8 and 10:12-14.

What *הבל* might mean in this context is also unclear. Ephemerality seems inappropriate, because it makes little sense to talk about things or words increasing ephemerality or trans-

<sup>5</sup>So Crenshaw (1988:131n.97); Gordis (1968:263). Cf Schoors (1992:35-6).

<sup>6</sup>*ההימיר* in Jer 2:11, and *שהשמם* in Lam 5:18 may offer other examples, but they are pointed throughout.



science. Something along the lines of 'futility' might be appropriate<sup>7</sup>, but so also might a more literal rendering, 'there are many words which increase breath', perhaps implying that many words may be only as effective as so much hot air. However, this reading is inappropriate when the word **הבלו** is used in v.12, where it describes 'the few days of his life'. Here ephemerality fits the context very well, particularly in light of the following two words, **ויעשם כצל**. 'Futile' would also be appropriate, and the ambiguity may be intentional in both instances.

The word **ויעשם** in v.12 is difficult because its usual meanings in Qohelet and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible seem not to make much sense here. Most commentators<sup>8</sup> argue that it has the force of 'spending time', which the verb displays in some later Hebrew literature<sup>9</sup>, perhaps under the influence of the Greek verb *πολεω*. The commentators disagree whether the three occurrences of **עשה** in Ruth 2:19 also bear this sense<sup>10</sup>. Alternatively, the plural ending on **ויעשם** may be read as a pronominal suffix on a singular verb, 'he made them'. This uses the verb in its usual biblical sense, but there is no obvious antecedent for the singular verb if the plural suffix refers to **לאדם** (presumably read as 'humankind'). It is possible that 'the one stronger than he' in v.10 could be the antecedent, and it might then be interpreted as 'God made them'. The resulting statement, 'he makes them like a shadow' is certainly in keeping with sentiments found elsewhere in Qohelet and the Hebrew Bible<sup>11</sup>, and ties in well with the notion of ephemerality. Ps 144:4 is particularly pertinent in this regard when it states, **אדם להבל דמה ימיו כצל עובר**. Perhaps again in Qoh 6:12 the ambiguity is intentional, adding to the uncertainty explicitly expressed in the verse. It may be worth noting that **ויעשם** occurs precisely at the centre of the verse (9 words and 30 letters either side), and the clause **יעשם כצל** falls between the two questions:

מי יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי-חיי הבלו  
ויעשם כצל  
אשר מי-יגיד לאדם מה-יהיה אחריו תחת השמש

<sup>7</sup>Cf Crenshaw (1988:130-1); Gordis (1968:172).

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:138); Fox (1989:225); Gordis (1968:264); Ogden (1987:98).

<sup>9</sup>Whitley (1979:61) cites Midrash Tillim on Ps 17:4 and Midrash Rabba Genesis, sec.91.

<sup>10</sup>Barton (1912:138) maintains that '**עשה**, in the sense of "spend time", is without parallel in BH.' He is followed in this by, e.g., Ogden (1987:98); Whitley (1979:61). However, Gordis (1968:264) argues that it does have this meaning in Ruth 2:19, and is followed by, e.g., Fox (1989:225).

<sup>11</sup>E.g., Pss 102:12; 144:4; Job 8:9; 14:2; 1 Chr 29:15.

Here as elsewhere in Qohelet, the word אשר has occasioned some debate. Some commentators<sup>12</sup> draw on Deut 3:24 as a precedent for the use of אשר with the same meaning as כי, which might also be the case elsewhere in Qohelet<sup>13</sup>. Whybray (1989a:11) however is unconvinced. He argues,

*For* is usually defended by reference to a supposedly similar usage in Dt. 3:24, but this explanation is somewhat dubious. In any case it makes no sense to link the two questions in a causal relationship. They are really in parallel.

The ambiguity over ויעשם כצל, and its place at the centre of the verse, may have a bearing on this question<sup>14</sup>. If this clause is interpreted to mean that people are made like a shadow, the final clause then follows on well, 'Who knows what is good for people during the few days of their fleeting/futile life: they are made like a shadow, such that no-one can tell them what will happen on earth after they've gone.' The *athnah* tells against this reading, but we have noted a number of examples where it may be better to read against the punctuation in the MT.

As we have seen, 6:10-12, like 6:7-9, picks up on issues addressed in both halves of the book. But again while death is not explicitly referred to, it may be alluded to here. There may be a contrast drawn between 'life' (what a person *is*) in v.10a and 'death' (the one stronger than he) in v.10b. This is clearer in v.12 where life is explicitly mentioned in the first half, and 'what will be afterwards' in the second half is highly appropriate as an allusion to death. This does not preclude the readings of these verses discussed above, but may again suggest another level of interpretation.

## 12.2 Conclusions

We noted above that 6:10-12 seems to take the form of a chiasmus revolving around the clause, ממה-יתר לאדם, in which positive affirmation in the first half is replaced by questions in the second:

A	what has been
B	is know
C	what advantage to people?
B'	who knows
A'	what will be?

<sup>12</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:138); Fox (1989:225); Gordis (1968:264).

<sup>13</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:140-4). He suggests 2:18; 4:9; 8:11-13,15 as further examples.

<sup>14</sup>On כצל here and in 8:13, and כצל in 7:12, see Wise (1990).



In this way, we suggested, these verses might serve to link the description of what has been observed in the first half of the book with the author's greater uncertainty regarding what will be in the future in the second half (although we acknowledged that observation is not restricted to the first half, nor speculation about the future to the second). However, we have also noted that the passage can be divided into two halves which place particular emphasis on human inability to content with someone stronger (God?) in the first, and the observation that they have been 'made like shadows' (?) in the second:

מה-שהיה כבר נקרא שמו ונודע אשר-הוא אדם  
ולא-יוכל לדין עם שהתקיף ממנו  
כי יש-דברים הרבה מרבים הבל מה-יתר לאדם

מי יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי-חיי הבלו  
ויעשם כצל  
אשר מי-יגיד לאדם מה-יהיה אחריו תחת השמש

In addition we observed that 6:10-12 might revolve around one statement and three questions relating to people which comprehensively cover the past, present and future of their lives, or around one statement and three questions which play on the word **מה**. This illustrates well how the way in which a passage is structured affects what the reader perceives to be most important in that passage - and 6:10-12 is one of many passages in Qohelet which may be structured in various different ways. Moreover, it would not be agreed by all commentators that 6:10-12 is a distinct thematic unit: we have already noted, for example, how suitable v.12 would be as an introduction to ch.7, and the expressions **מה-יותר** in 6:8 and **מה-לעני יודע** in v.9 could tie in with **מה-יתר** in v.11 and **מי-יודע מה-טוב** in v.12 in a passage from 6:7-12 which revolves around the statement **גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח**.

We have also noted in 6:10-12 a number of plays on words, including **מה**, **אשר**, **דבר**, **רבה**, and **הבל**. This increases the ambiguity of the passage, and consequently increases the difficulty the reader faces in trying to make sense of it.

## CHAPTER 13, What is Good/Better for People (7:1-8:8)

### 13.1 Commentary

#### 13.1.1 7:1-8

Crenshaw (1988:133) describes the opening words of 7:1-8, טוב שם משמן טוב, as ‘an exquisite example of chiastic alliteration.’ This is certainly true. The play on the words שם and שמן, and on the meaning of טוב is typical of Qohelet. However, the literary artistry, and the comfortable sentiments serve to heighten the effect of the shocking statement that follows in the second half of the verse, ויום המות מיום הולדו. It would appear that the sense of the first טוב carries over into this half of the verse, but its omission serves to speed up the clause and to give it a balanced parallelism in place of the chiasmic arrangement of the first half of the verse:

7:1a טוב שם משמן טוב

7:1b ויום המות  
מיום הולדו

Both halves thus revolve around the comparative *mem*, but in different ways. Both halves also have one common element either side of the *mem* which highlights the contrast between the elements that change: שם compared to שמן, and המות compared to הולדו.

The pronominal suffix on הולדו has no obvious antecedent, unless it refers back to האדם in 6:12. Alternatively, it might be read in an impersonal sense, and rendered "one's". The meaning of the verse is little affected either way, but the presence of the suffix where it seems to be unnecessary for the sense of the verse, and where it breaks the parallelism with המות (although creating an equal number of letters either side of the comparative *mem*), raises the question of who is referred to. Perhaps the uncertainty is a device to indicate the universality of the statement, to the extent of including the reader him- or herself.

V.2 consists of two halves, a ‘better than’ saying and a supporting statement, each of 9 words and 28 letters. Moreover, the two elements being compared in the first half are also precisely the same length in words (4) and letters (12), as are the two halves of the supporting statement introduced by the באשר:



טוב ללכת אל-בית-אבל  
 מ- לכת אל-בית משה  
 באשר הוא סוף כל-האדם  
 והחי יתן אל-לבו

Like the two comparisons in the first verse, there is only one word which is different in the two halves of the comparison in the first half of this verse, and this draws particular attention to these words: **אבל** and **משה**. This offers support to the statement in the second half of v.1, but seems surprising in light of the verses which issue the 'call to enjoyment', where eating and drinking (**שתה**) seem to be approved. Indeed, in 2:24; 3:13 and 8:15, eating and drinking are part of what is described as 'given by God'; 8:15 also asserts that there is no good for people *except* to eat, drink and enjoy themselves; and 9:9 exhorts the reader to eat and drink. **משה**, in 7:2, seems to have the extended meaning of feasting, which includes both eating and drinking, and this comparison seems to introduce an ironic twist to the 'call to enjoyment'. It may be that the similarity of the word **אבל** (which is used only in 7:2,4 in Qohelet; **ספר** is used for mourning in 3:4; 12:5) to **אכל** also plays on this irony.

The 'end of every person' in the second half of the verse probably refers to the 'house of mourning' and, by implication, also to the 'day of death' in v.1. There is then a particular irony in the concluding statement of v.2 that the living take it to heart (whatever precisely this means). **in לכלב חי הוא טוב מן-האריה המת כי החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אינם יודעים מאומה** in 9:4,5 may well be a similarly ironic reflection. There may be some tension between these sentiments and those expressed in 5:19, **לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו**, particularly in light of 7:4 where **שמחה** unexpectedly replaces **משה**.

V.3 does not display the same balance as v.2. However, the two halves of the 'better than' saying again change only one word, but in this instance each half consists of only one word, **שחק** and **כעס**. This saying too is rather surprising, especially in view of the use of these words elsewhere in the book. In 1:18 we read, **ברב חכמה רב-כעס ויסוף דעת ויסוף מכאוב**, then the sentiments also seem to be decidedly negative in the observation of a person in 2:23 who **כל-ימיו מכאבים וכעס ענינו גם-בלילה לא-שכב לבו**; and even more in 5:16 the person who **והסר כעס מלבך והעבר רעה מבשרך**; then the advice, **כל-ימיו בחשך יאכל וכעס הרבה וחליו וקצף**, is given in 11:10. While laughter is treated negatively in 2:2, **לשחוק אמרתי מהולל**, and in 7:6, **כקול הסירים תחת הסיר כן שחק הכסיל**, it is stated in 3:4 that there is a time for it, and in

10:19 the assertion is made, לשחוק עשים להם - although this and the other statements in 10:19 may well be double-edged.

Like v.1, v.3 also plays on the meaning of טוב, not by using the word twice in different ways, but by using טוב and ייטב<sup>1</sup>. The two verses together illustrate well the author's propensity for playing with the range of meaning of words. The reader may wonder why ייטב is used when the expression לב-טוב occurs in 9:7, because the verbal form in 7:3 confuses rather than clarifies the sense of the verse. When the verb occurs in 11:9, it is used to issue advice, and the role of the verb is clear, ויטיבך לבך. But this does mean that, typical of Qohelet, the same expression appears in three different forms, the last in the second person:

ייטב לב	7:3
לב-טוב	9:7
יטיבך לבך	11:10

These provide a contrast to 9:3, לב בני-האדם מלא-רע, and also to the similar sentiments in 8:11, מלא לב בני-האדם בהם לעשות רע.

The most striking feature of 7:4 is its similarity to the first part of 7:2,

אל-בית משה	אל-בית-אבל מלכת	טוב ללכת	v.2
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לב חכמים	ב- בית אבל	ולב כסילים	ב- בית שמחה	v.4
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The final word, שמחה is unexpected because for no apparent reason it is used in place of משה in v.2<sup>2</sup>. V.4 introduces a new theme which is an important aspect of vv.4-7, 'wisdom and folly', and the unnecessary variation seems to detract from the focus on this new theme. However, this verse's similarity to v.2 still serves effectively to tie the themes of 'death' and 'wisdom and folly' together, this being achieved also by the chiasm in vv.3,4:

<sup>1</sup>There is some debate about how closely the verbs טוב and ייטב are connected. It seems that טוב occurs as a verb only in the perfect, while ייטב occurs only in the imperfect. There seems also to be no difference in meaning between them, so that they may well be forms of the same verb as Ges<sup>K</sup> (78b) asserts. Höver-Johag (TDOT, V, p.297) maintains,

The root *tb* belongs to the small group of originally biliteral substantives; like most roots in this group, it is of Proto-Semitic origin. Analogy to the trilateral roots at an early date gave rise to a trilateral perfective by-form *ytb* with supplementary function alongside the biliteral perfective form *tb*.

Cf BDB, pp.373-5,405-6 (treated as two different verbs).

<sup>2</sup>Osborn (1970) argues,

Koheleth uses his favorite word for 'pleasure' (*simha(h)*) instead of the word *mistte(h)* ('feasting') in verse 2. This supports the suggestion that in verse 2 the author is quoting a popular saying, while in verse 4 he is adding his commentary.

According to Osborn, as also Gordis, the whole passage is made up of traditional proverbs with additions and comments by Qohelet.



joy	טוב כעס משחק	v.3a
sadness	כי-ברע פנים ייטב לב	v.3b
sadness	לב חכמים בבית אבל	v.4a
joy	ולב כסילים בבית שמחה	v.4b

We noted above that in vv.1-3 there is only one different word in the two halves of the 'better than' sayings. V.4 is different because there are two different words in each half so that the contrast is drawn between 'the wise and mourning', and 'the foolish and joy'. This serves the purpose of the verse well. However, in v.5 every word in the verse is different, only the root שמע being repeated, and then in two different ways. Moreover, the balance of the two halves of the verse is upset in two ways. Firstly, where in v.4 the plural חכמים is compared with the plural כסילים, and some similar balance may be intended between the singular הכסיל in v.6 and חכם in v.7, in v.5 the singular חכם is compared to the plural הכסילים. Perhaps the asymmetry is intended to indicate that even one wise person is better than many fools, in a similar way to 9:18 where almost opposite sentiments are expressed, וחוטא אחד יאבד טובה הרבה. Secondly, the infinitive verb לשמע in the first part of the verse is paralleled by a noun and participial verb, איש שמע, in the second part. This makes the verse sound decidedly awkward - if the comparison were simply between the rebuke of a wise person on the one hand, and the song of fools on the other, it could have been more effectively expressed, טוב לשמע גערת חכם משמע שיר כסילים. Perhaps the author is drawing attention to the word איש. It might be that (s)he is hinting that the problem is not the song of fools in itself, but the fact that a man (sic!) listens to it rather than the rebuke of a wise person: it is what he chooses to listen to that is the issue. The fact that שמע is the only root repeated in the verse would lend support to this reading. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, איש may be introduced to contribute to the assonance of 's' sounds in the second half of the verse that continues in v.6 which also focuses on the noise produced by the fool.

V.6 displays an impressive range of assonances, alliterations and wordplays. The most obvious of these is the play on the word סיר which is used in the plural to mean 'thorns' and in the singular for 'pot'. The sound of this word picks up on שיר and also כסילים in the previous verse. Moreover, it continues the 's' sound from that verse, and also the 'e' sound from איש, שיר and כסילים in v.5, and כי and הכסיל in this verse. There is also a proliferation of 'k' sounds - כי, כ-קול, שחק, הכסיל - and together these portray the crackling and hissing produced by a fire burning thorns. There is also a wordplay on the word קול which represents the

‘sound’ of the burning thorns, but elsewhere is used of the human voice. This makes it particularly appropriate as a simile for the fool’s laughter.

The artistry of the verse is disrupted by the abrupt ending, **וגם-זה הבל**. Moreover, this clause does nothing to enhance the sentiments of the verse, nor is it clear precisely what it refers to or even what it means in this context. In other words, it is fairly typical of Qohelet’s use of the expression. It should be noted that these three words fall between the eight words of the rest of v.6, concerning the fool, and the eight words of v.7, concerning a wise person, and they could refer either backwards or forwards, or perhaps even both ways.

Ogden (1987:105) writes of v.7, ‘This verse is yet another conundrum for the interpreter ... The problem has two dimensions: one is the meaning of the text itself, the other, the relationship of the verse with what preceded.’ The first half of the verse presents no great problem for translation, but seems to bear little connection with the preceding or following verses. It may be that **כי** is another example of the asseverative use of the word, meaning ‘surely’ rather than the usual meaning of ‘because, for’ as in v.6 - the use of the same word in two consecutive verses, or even in the same verse, with two different meanings seems to be characteristic of Qohelet.

However, there are a number of grammatical anomalies and ambiguities in the second half of the verse. Firstly, the use of the object marker attached to a noun without a definite article is unusual, though not unprecedented<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, the word order may be unusual if **מתנה** is the subject: holding it to the end may place particular emphasis on the word. Thirdly, if **מתנה** is the subject, it disagrees with its verb in gender, which again is unusual but not unprecedented<sup>4</sup>. These last two serve to unsettle the reader, because if the verse is read without the final word, **כי העשק יהולל חכם ויאבד את-לב**, it seems that the two verbs in the sentence both relate to **העשק**, with which they agree in gender and which makes better sense of the word order of the verse. A solution which Whitley (1979:115) suggests, following the versions, is to view **מתנה** as an otherwise unattested example of a word from the root **מתן**, ‘strong, powerful’, so that the second half of the verse reads, ‘and destroys his *strong* heart’. This still leaves the problem of the apparently feminine ending, but Whitley (1979:115)

<sup>3</sup>Cf Ges<sup>K</sup>, 117c. Qoh 3:15; 4:4; 7:7,14; 8:9; 9:1; 12:14 provide further examples.

<sup>4</sup>Cf Ges<sup>K</sup>, 145. Qoh 10:15 may provide a further example.



explains this as 'the archaic third person singular masculine suffix.' This may serve to explain away some of the grammatical difficulties, and it may also indicate that the author is quoting an ancient saying. It might also be that the author is deliberately playing with the grammar of the verse to unsettle the reader: the verse seems reasonably clear (in its own right, if not in context), and the reader may think he or she has understood its meaning, right up to the last word which effectively throws the whole verse into confusion again. This places a great deal of emphasis on the word **מתנה**, which is usually rendered 'bribe' in this verse, but could also mean 'gift' (it should be obvious by now that the author's use of another word for gift, **מתת**, elsewhere in Qohelet is no argument against this suggestion), its usual meaning elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. If it is 'a gift' that destroys the heart, rather than oppression, there is very considerable irony in this verse in light of the statements elsewhere in the book concerning the gift of God - a very important theme. This might even apply if the word is read as 'bribe' in light of 5:19, **זה מתת אלהים היא כי לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו**. Might this be seen as God 'bribing' those who please him?

**ראשיתו** and **אחרית** in v.8 are ambiguous because it is unclear the 'beginning' and 'end' is what intended. **דבר** could be translated 'word'<sup>5</sup>, in which case the sentiments might be similar to 4:17-5:6; 8:1-6 and especially 10:12-14 which discusses the speech of the wise and the foolish. Indeed, 10:13 is the only other verse in Qohelet that uses the word **אחרית**, and there it quite clearly applies it to speech, **תחלת דברי-פיהו סכלות ואחרית פיהו הוללות רעה**. 12:12-13 is also pertinent, although typical of Qohelet, it uses two different words for 'end', **עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ ולהג הרבה יגעת בשר סוף דבר הכל נשמע**. But **דבר** could also be read as 'thing' in which case there might be another allusion to a person's death and birth along similar lines to 7:1b, **יום המות מיום הולדו**, ו-(טוב). The unnecessary use of the pronominal suffix in both instances lends support to this reading, particularly as it upsets the balance of the sayings.

It may be significant that the only other occurrence of precisely the word **מראשיתו** is in Job 42:12 where we read the clause, **ויהוה ברך את-אחרית איוב מראשתו**, which is particularly

<sup>5</sup>So Loader (1986:80) who argues,

it is clear from the two parallel halves of verse 8, from the idea of being easily offended in verse 9, and especially the express mention of speech in verse 10 that the subject is words.

Whybray (1989:116) suggests that 'in v.8a the word *dabar* can equally mean "thing" or "word, speech"', but most commentators translate it as 'matter'.

pertinent to Qoh 7:10, אל-תאמר מה היה שהימים הראשנים היו טובים מאלה. We also read in Job 8:7, והיה ראשיתך מצער ואחריתך ישגה מאד. There may also be some irony in the fact that אחרית is used to refer to the beginning of God/the Lord's work<sup>6</sup>; often of the first fruits offered to the Lord<sup>7</sup>; and in phrases like 'the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom'<sup>8</sup>. The root אחר occurs some 15 times in Qohelet, of which 3 are in ch.7. But it is used in a different way on each occasion: in v.8 אחרית means 'end'; in v.14 אחריו might be rendered 'after him' or 'afterwards'; in v.22 אחרים should be translated 'others', indicating other people. In addition, we noted in 1:11 the word אחרנים meaning 'that which, or those who, come after', and the verb תאחר, 'to delay', appears in 5:3. Such varied use is typical of Qohelet.

There are a number of fairly minor ambiguities in 7:1-8, and perhaps the most significant concerns the word מתנה. But the main element of surprise in the passage is the positive treatment of death. This theme is picked up from 6:7-9,10-12, and again 'death' seems to be the primary underlying theme of the section. However, it is not at all clear why the author adopts the attitude (s)he does in these verses. The matter is further complicated in the following verses.

### 13.1.2 7:9-15a

We noted above that 7:9-14 picks up the themes of 7:1-8 in reverse order, and that many of the sentiments also appear to be reversed. This is seen most clearly if 7:9-14 is considered in three sections, each of which in some way questions the seemingly confident presentation of the repeated 'better than' statement in 7:1-8. Thus the comparison of folly and wisdom continues in vv.9-10, but at the centre of these two verses is a question about 'what is better', מה היה שהימים הראשנים היו טובה מאלה. The focus in vv.11-12 is on wisdom (חכמה occurring three times), and this is initiated by a distortion of the 'better than' saying such that עם טובה introduces an element of surprise and irony. Vv.13-14b starts and ends with reference to the work of God, but this revolves round the line at the centre of these verses (v.14a), ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה, which, by its wordplay on טוב and use of רעה/ראה, serves further to question the confident 'better than' sayings of 7:1-8.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Gen 1:1; Job 40:19; Prov 8:22.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Exod 23:19; Lev 2:12; Num 15:20; Deut 18:4; Jer 2:3.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7.



In addition, v.9 picks up on v.8b, and seems to support what is stated there, but the advice **אל-תבהל ברוחך לכעוס** appears to contradict the saying in v.3 **טוב כעס משחק**, and the assertion that **לב כסילים בבית שמחה** is in some tension with **כעס בחיק כסילים ינוח** in v.4b, the reference to **שיר כסילים** in v.5 and **שחק הכסיל** in v.6.

V.10 is ambiguous. It might refute the suggestion that 'the former days were better than these', in which case it may agree with the sentiments of v.8a (so Whybray, 1989a:117); but it might also concede that they were in fact better, thus contradicting v.8a (so Crenshaw, 1988:137), and advise against seeking a reason for this situation. The verse could be interpreted to mean that the former days were not as good as they seemed, or that the present time is not as bad as it seems, or that the present time is as bad as it seems but it is futile to ask why.

In view of the collection of **טוב ... מן-** sayings earlier in this chapter and elsewhere in Qohelet, and because it would seem to express sound sentiments, we might have expected 7:11 to start **טובה חכמה מן-נחלה**. In this way the similarly constructed words **חכמה** and **נחלה** would be compared, with **חכמה** coming out on top, as it does for example in Prov 3:13-14 where we read, **אשרי אדם מצא חכמה ואדם יפיק תבונה כי טוב סחרה מסחר כסף ומחרוץ תבואתה**.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Prov 3:16, **ארך ימים בימינה בשמאולה עשר וכבוד**, expresses similar sentiments to Qoh 7:12, **כי בצל החכמה בצל הכסף ויתרון דעת החכמה תחיה בעליה**. However, the verse is probably constructed this way precisely because it resembles the earlier verses but then does not present the reader with the sentiments (s)he might have expected. The question then arises as to how we should understand **-עם**. Its usual meaning is 'with', in which case the verse comments that wisdom is good when it has an inheritance to back it up (so RSV). This would seem to imply that wisdom by itself is of relatively little use, an argument which may find support in 9:13-15. However, in 2:16 **-עם** seems to be used with the sense 'as, like', which also occurs a few times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (cf Job 9:26; 37:18). In this case, the verse uses **נחלה** as a simile for wisdom to illustrate its 'good'-ness (so NIV<sup>10</sup>). Although this is an unusual use of **-עם**, it seems to make better sense of the verse in its context, but the issue is further confused by the next verse.

<sup>9</sup>Cf Prov 8:10-11, although this may be evidence of the personifying of wisdom; 9:11; 16:16.

<sup>10</sup>NEB, REB translate in line with the earlier verses: 'Wisdom is better than possessions'. Cf Schoors (1992:201-2).

V.12 purports to serve as an explanation of the previous verse, and the reader might expect to find here a clue to the interpretation of טוֹבָה חִכְמָה עִם-נַחֲלָה. However, it only complicates the issue, because both halves of the verse are ambiguous. As it stands, the first half of the verse does not seem to make sense. Were the preposition כִּי rather than בִּי, the verse would follow on very well from a comparative use of עִם in the previous verse. Thus the NIV translates these verses, 'Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing ... Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter'. Mistaking a *beth* for a *kaph* would be an easy error, and Barton (1912:143) argues that we should read both in this way. However, Vulg. and Pesh. seem to have taken the first preposition as a *beth*, but the second as *kaph* in which case the verse should be rendered, 'for being in the shadow of wisdom is *like* being in the shadow of money', perhaps implying that both offer security. However, if עִם in the previous verse is understood in its usual sense of 'with', then the verses might be understood thus: 'Wisdom is good with an inheritance ... for to be in the shadow of wisdom is to be in the shadow of money', implying that wisdom will bring in money. Some commentators suggest<sup>11</sup> that this same sense could be achieved if the *beth* is read as the *beth essentiae* (cf Ges<sup>K</sup> 119i<sup>12</sup>), which does not appear in translation, and the verse rendered, 'for the protection of wisdom is the protection of money'. Perhaps the phrase is intended to continue the ambiguity of the previous verse.

The relevance of יִתְרוֹן דַּעַת in 7:12 is far from clear. No word from the root דַּעַת has occurred so far in this chapter, and none appears again until v.22, so that דַּעַת seems rather out of place. It could be either the infinitive construct, 'knowing', or the noun, 'knowledge'. דַּעַת is separated from הַחִכְמָה by a *zaqeph*, suggesting the translation, 'The advantage of *knowledge* is that wisdom gives life to its possessor<sup>13</sup>'. It may be that דַּעַת in this instance is being used as a near-synonym for חִכְמָה: as we noted above, the words seem often to be used to convey much the same meaning. Alternatively, the accent could be ignored (as seems necessary elsewhere in Qohelet), and the verse read, 'The advantage of *knowing wisdom* is that it gives life to its possessor'. If this is the case, the clause provides support for the assertion in 2:14 that יֵשׁ יִתְרוֹן לַחִכְמָה מִן הַסְּכָלוֹת כִּי־תֵרוֹן הָאוֹר מִן הַחֹשֶׁךְ, particularly if light represents life. However, it seems to contradict the positive evaluation of death in 7:1-8.

<sup>11</sup>Cf Crenshaw (1988:138); Gordis (1968:273).

<sup>12</sup>See also Schoors (1992:195-6).

<sup>13</sup>Note that here, as in 5:10,12; 8:8 בְּעֵלִיָּה is plural although the sense seems to be singular. The versions have the singular. Cf Schoors (1992:72).



As we noted above, there is a sudden turn in 7:13-14b to consider the work of God. These two verses are construct in a chiasmus which stresses that good and bad ultimately come from God, and that his work is unchangeable. However, the centre of the chiasmus involves a play on the words **טוב** and **רעה**, such that the reader is left uncertain what precisely these words indicate:

- A The work of God
- B cannot be altered.
- C Wordplay on **טוב** and **רעה**:
- B' both are alike
- A' the work of God

**טוב** is used in two different ways, similar to 7:1 except that both senses here may be different to both there. **רעה** is used only once, but it is followed by the similar word **ראה**. The wordplay can be most clearly seen if the clauses are compared thus:

ביום טובה היה בטוב  
וביום רעה ראה

This ties in very well with 7:1-12, because again the question arises, 'what is "good"?' Indeed, it may be that vv.13-14 call into question the whole enterprise of seeking to establish what is 'good' or 'better'.

The final part of v.14 is one of the lines asserting human inability to know the future<sup>14</sup>, and further emphasises human inability to bring about any real change. This raises again the question whether this verse and the previous one express the view of a skeptic who regards God as an arbitrary despot who flings prosperity and adversity around at his whim, and denies people any say in what happens to them<sup>15</sup>; or the view of someone who views God as being in control of all worldly events, good and bad, but confesses that God's ways are beyond human comprehension. Of course, the ultimate problem for human comprehension is the fact of death, and it is this that 7:1-14 opens with and also alludes to in its conclusion.

V.15a is ambiguous because it may reflect on the previous verse, **הכל** referring to *both* **יום טובה** and **יום רעה**; or it may point forward to *both* **רשע מאריך ברעתו** and **צדיק אבד בצדקו**; or it could be a claim in line with those made in ch.2, 'I have seen *everything* in my days of *hebel*', which might reflect either on what precedes it, or on what follows, or both. All these

<sup>14</sup>But NJPS, following Rashi, translates, 'consequently, man may find no fault with him.'

<sup>15</sup>Schoor's interpretation (1992:118-9) of this verse would certainly support such a contention. He argues that the *waw* on **אחרי** refers to God, and the verse means that 'man cannot go beyond or behind God's ways and find any basis for criticism of his actions' (1992:119).

are possible, and the position of the phrase may be intended to allow for multiple interpretation. It would thus serve as a link between the consideration of 'what is good/better' in 7:1-14 and the related issues of 'righteousness and wickedness' and 'good and bad' in vv.15b-22. However, we have seen that there is considerable ambiguity about 'what is good/better' in the first half of ch.7, as the author plays on the word טוב and the expression טוב מן-, and presents sayings which at least stand in some tension, if they do not actually contradict each other.

### 13.1.3 7:15b-22

This section continues the uncertainty over what is 'good', the word טוב occurring an equal distance from the beginning and the end of the passage, and again being used in different ways. The section introduces to the discussion the ethical concepts of 'righteousness' (צדק) and 'wickedness' (רשע), but there is a confusing interchange between the words צדק, טוב and even חכם, and the phrase ירא אלהים, on the one hand, and רשע, רעה, חטא and סכל, on the other, such that the distinction between ethical and non-ethical is decidedly blurred. One might argue that, ethical implications aside, there is still a comparison between opposites, the 'good' on one side, and the 'bad' on the other:

צדק	רשע
טוב	רעה
ירא אלהים	חטא
חכם	סכל

But doubt is cast on the usefulness of such categorisation.

7:15b is presented in the form of two balanced antithetical phrases, each element of which - apart from the introductory יש - seems to be the opposite of its counterpart:

יש	צדיק	אבד	צדקו
ויש	רשע	מאריך	ברעתו

It seems that traditional doctrine is being turned on its head, because where one might have expected יש צדיק מאריך צדקו (along the lines of, for example, Exod 20:12; Deut 4:40 and Prov 3:1-2) and יש רשע אבד ברעתו (along the lines of, for example, Ps 37:10; 55:23; Prov 7:24-27), the verbs are used the other way around. Might the author be attempting to shock the reader by presenting facts contrary to traditional wisdom - or is there, perhaps, a double twist to the verse?

The balance of the verse is upset by the last word, ברעתו. The effect of the conciseness and repetition of the first phrase is quite striking: of the four words, two are from the



same root, צדק, one is the introductory וְ, and the other word is the one on which the whole phrase turns, אֲבָר. This construction is typical of the 'better than' sayings in 7:1-8. However, the effect is lost somewhat in the second phrase because a different root is used for final word. To have gained the full effect of so shocking a statement, we might have expected an unambiguous word for 'evil' from the root רָשָׁע, as earlier in the phrase, but the root רָעָה is used instead. In the previous verse רָעָה seems to be used without moral connotations to indicate 'adversity', hence 7:15b might be rendered: 'there is a righteous person who perishes in his/her righteousness, and there is a wicked person who prolongs his/her life in his/her adversity'. This might be understood to mean that while there *are* righteous people who die before their time despite their righteousness, there are also wicked people who live longer but experience adversity all their days. This could be interpreted as a vindication of traditional wisdom in light of the apparent anomaly of wicked people out-living righteous people. 8:12,13 could be read in a similar way:

אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עָשָׂה רָע מֵאֵת וּמֵאֲרִיךְ לוֹ כִּי גַם-יִוָּדַע אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה-טוֹב לִירָאִי  
הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִירָאוּ מִלִּפְנֵי וְטוֹב לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְרָשָׁע וְלֹא-יֵאֲרִיךְ יָמִים כְּצֵל אֲשֶׁר  
אֵינָנו יֵרָא מִלִּפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים

7:15b is, in fact, ambiguous, and may, again, be understood in different ways depending on the approach of the reader. At least the careful reader is likely to wonder why the balance of the final phrase is upset by the use of this different root for the final word.

V.16 is understood in different ways by the commentators<sup>16</sup>. This might be illustrated by comparing Crenshaw and Fox, who generally read Qohelet as a pessimistic work, with Ogden and Whybray, who are more positive in their interpretation. Crenshaw (1988:140) renders the verse, 'Do not *be* too righteous and do not *be* excessively wise; why should you be ruined?' [Our emphasis]; Fox (1989:233) translates it, 'Do not *be* very righteous nor *become* exceedingly wise, lest you be dumbfounded' [Our emphasis]; Ogden (1987:114) offers the translation, 'Do not *claim* exceptional righteousness or *ardently pursue* wisdom. Why should you invite destruction upon yourself?' [Our emphasis]; and Whybray (1989:120) contends that the verse argues against *self*-righteousness and *pretensions* to wisdom.

<sup>16</sup>Kaiser (1979:85) contends that 'few verses in Ecclesiastes are more susceptible to incorrect interpretation than 7:16-18.' Brindle (1985:243), after quoting Kaiser, adds, 'interpreters of Ecclesiastes tend to view the argument of 7:15-18 in a variety of ways, depending upon whether they are willing to attribute to the author a sense of relativity and 'moderation' in moral conduct.'

The problem for the translator comes in the form of four apparently parallel admonitions in vv.16-17, which, in fact are not parallel. They might be compared thus, pairing the phrases which appear initially to directly parallel each other:

אל-תהי צדיק הרבה  
אל-תרשע הרבה

ואל-תתחכם יותר  
ואל-תהי סכל

In thus comparing these phrases it readily becomes apparent that they are not so carefully matched as we might have expected were the author simply warning the reader away from extremes of righteousness, wisdom, wickedness and folly. Had this been his/her intention, the author might have constructed the verses so that they presented clear parallels, perhaps something like this:

אל-תצדק הרבה  
אל-תרשע הרבה

ואל-תתחכם יותר  
ואל-תסכל יותר

Perhaps the first point to note is that the word 'overmuch', with which the RSV translates הרבה after צדיק and רשע, goes beyond the sense of the Hebrew word, which means 'greatly' and does not express the judgment implicit in 'overmuch'. It occurs fifteen times in Qohelet (1:16; 2:7; 5:6,11,16,19; 6:11; 7:16,17; 9:18; 11:8,8; 12:9,12,12), and nowhere else is there any reason for translating it 'overmuch', and indeed RSV does not render it so anywhere else. However, the root יתר often does indicate an excess of something, and there would, therefore, be some justification in rendering יותר here as 'excessively' or 'overmuch'. The same may apply in 2:15, למה חכמתי אני אז יותר.

The second point is the use of the verb היה in אל-תהי צדיק הרבה and אל-תהי סכל. Of the six admonitions in the form אל-ת... in this passage, only these two use היה. Whybray (1989a:120) argues, 'the elliptical form (*'al-t<sup>ehi</sup> saddiq*) rather than the simple verbal form *'al-tisdaq* (compare the parallel *'al-tirsa* in v.17) suggests that the meaning is 'Do not *claim* to be a *saddiq*', that is, a righteous person.'<sup>17</sup> However, Fox (1989:235) counters, 'Qohelet's words as they stand do not refer merely to a pretense of righteousness. He could have

<sup>17</sup>Whybray (1978:191) asserts that the meaning of this admonition 'is a matter of crucial importance for the understanding of Qohelet's teaching as a whole.' Cf Bridges (1960:163); Castellino (1968:24).



expressed that idea by a prohibition such as 'al to'mar saddiq 'ani.' Fox is certainly correct that had the author intended *unambiguously* to say 'do not *claim* to be greatly righteous', (s)he could have done so in considerably clearer fashion. Whybray is also correct that the more complicated structure could be seen as elliptical. We should note, though, that if this phrase is to be read as an ellipsis, so then is the phrase ואל-תהי סכל, which could also have been rendered more simply. Perhaps the point is that nothing is stated clearly and simply, so that multiple interpretations are possible<sup>18</sup>.

The clause ואל-תתחכם יותר in v.16b raises the question why the author has used the hithpael form of the verb. Of the six admonitions of the form ...אל-ת in this passage, only here is the hithpael used. If the author intended unambiguously to say, 'do not be excessively wise', this would have been simply achieved by the use of the qal, as in the question in 2:15. We might conclude, then, either that this is not what was intended, or that the phrase is designed to be ambiguous. The hithpael of חכם is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in a difficult phrase in Exod 1:10, הנה נתחכמה לו פן-ירבה. The sense seems to be 'let us act wisely', or 'let us display wisdom'. If the latter applies, our phrase might be translated, 'do not display excessive wisdom', which could be understood to mean that one should not seek to display greater wisdom than he or she possesses, or that one should not flaunt his/her wisdom. Whybray (1989a:120) cites 2 Sam 13:5 as an example of a hithpael verb used to indicate the feigning of something one does not possess<sup>19</sup>, but Fox (1989:235) counters by using Exod 1:10 to indicate that the hithpael does not imply a pretense at wisdom<sup>20</sup>. Again it seems that a more complicated form has been adopted which, far from clarifying its meaning, allows for the phrase to be read in different ways.

אל-תרשע רבה seems unambiguous, and is the only one of these four phrases which appears to be clear and concise. Is there some reason why only the statement not to be very wicked is clear when the others are not? Does the author intend the reader to draw the conclu-

<sup>18</sup>Contra Whybray (1978:196) who says,

If then the connotations of 16a and 16b are similar in that they both warn against certain human pretensions, why did not Qoheleth use the same grammatical construction to express his meaning? It was the limitations of the Hebrew language which prevented him from doing this *if his meaning was to be unambiguous.* [Our emphasis]

<sup>19</sup>See also Ges<sup>K</sup>, 54d.

<sup>20</sup>Brindle (1985:255-6) argues, 'It is perhaps obvious by now that Whybray's interpretation of the passage depends almost entirely upon a highly questionable meaning of *one word* in the passage: תתחכם (7:16b).' [His emphasis]

sion that of the four admonitions made here, only the call not to be very wicked is unequivocal? However, the implications of this phrase are not so straightforward. The reader may wonder whether the admonition not to be very wicked implies that a small degree of wickedness is acceptable. Fox (1989:235), for example, argues that, 'by warning against acting *very* wickedly, Qohelet seems to be recommending a *little* wickedness'. The implication of Gordis's 'Golden Mean' interpretation<sup>21</sup> is similar (1968:178): he argues that we find here 'the Aristotelian principle of ethics with which Koheleth is familiar'. However, Crenshaw (1988:141) disputes this argument:

The ancient curse in Deut. 27:24 ("Cursed be whoever slays his neighbour in secret") does not suggest that it is all right to do so in public. In the same way, Qohelet's warning against excessive wickedness does not endorse moderate evil.

It may be that, rather than *recommending* a little evil, Qohelet is conceding the fact that people do commit some evil acts, and is warning against more than this level of wickedness. This is realism which is explicitly expressed in v.20.

V.18 concludes this half of the passage by asserting what is 'good' in all this. It does not take the form of a טוֹב מִן- saying, but rather of a טוֹב אֲשֶׁר saying which we find elsewhere only in 5:4,17. The first half of the verse consists of two admonitions conveying the same idea, one in a positive way and one in the negative form familiar from the preceding verses, ...אֶל-תֵּת,

תִּאֲחַז בִּזְהָ  
וְגַם-מִזֶּה אֶל-תִּנַּח אֶת-יָדְךָ

However, it is not clear precisely what is being referred to. Some commentators<sup>22</sup> assume that 'this' and 'that' refer to righteousness and wickedness in the previous two verses. If this is the case, the author would be recommending that we grasp hold of righteousness, but presumably in moderation, and that we should not cast off wickedness, although in this regard, too, we should practise moderation. This reading, however, selects only two of the four admonitions, and it might be better with Fox (1989:236) and Whybray (1989a:121) to take 'this' and 'that'

<sup>21</sup>Cf Horton (1972) who examines Qohelet's 'Golden Mean' in some depth. In his conclusion Horton (1972:21) writes,

With an ear for ambiguity, Koheleth subtly and independently probes diverse ways of joining contrary traits and events ... He is as convinced of the ambiguous and inconsistent character of existence as the early, philosophically oriented Taoists of Asia and Plato and Heraclitus in the thought of Greece.

Whybray (1978) provides the most sustained attack on this reading, and Brindle (1985) makes a useful survey of the various interpretations of the verse.

<sup>22</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:144); Crenshaw (1988:142).



as referring to the counsel of each of the two verses as a whole. If we read the phrase in this way it serves to emphasise the advice offered in the preceding verses - however they are understood. It would not, therefore, do anything to clarify the interpretation.

Of the second half of the verse, Barton (1912:144) concludes that it must be 'a gloss added by some orthodox Jew, probably a *Chasid*'. Crenshaw (1988:142) is more cautious when he maintains that '[t]he optimism in the final clause does not agree with Qohelet's experience in 7:15 ... If the observation is authentic, it *must be full of irony*' [our emphasis]. These two commentators seem to struggle with the apparent orthodoxy of the verse in what they consider to be at least an unorthodox book. But the 'orthodoxy' of the phrase is dependent on how it is interpreted.

There are two issues to consider here. The first concerns the word יצא'. Its usual meaning in the Hebrew Bible is 'to come forth from', and on occasion this could be rendered 'get away from' or 'escape'<sup>23</sup>. If such a meaning is understood in 7:18, it would seem to imply that the one who fears God escapes the dangers mentioned in vv.16-17, which seems a very positive claim. However, some commentators<sup>24</sup> perceive here a meaning of יצא' which is not attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but does appear in the Mishna. Thus Whitley (1979:67) argues:

It is to be noted that יצא' connotes 'what is due' in Ben Sira; for example וְשִׁית אֲבָלוֹ כִּי־צָא בּוֹ (and arrange his mourning as his due, 38:17; cf. also 10:27). So in Mishnaic Hebrew the verb conveys the sense of 'fulfilling one's duty': thus אָם כִּי־יֵצֵא לְבוֹ יֵצֵא (If he directs his mind (to the Shema) he fulfils his obligation, Bera 2:1). Hence, we may render here: 'he gives due attention to both of them.'

If the word is read in this way, it simply serves to emphasise that the 'person who fears God' follows the advice in vv.16-17. But Crenshaw (1988:142) seems to read יצא' in the opposite sense when he writes: 'In *Ber.* 2:1 ... the idiom *ys*' means to be *released* from the power of an obligation. The same sense of *ys*' appears to be found in Sir. 38:17' [our emphasis]. In this case the meaning is little different to the usual biblical meaning, and this is reflected in Crenshaw's translation (1988:140) of this part of the verse: 'the person who fears God will come out well with respect to them both'<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Gen 39:12,15; 1 Sam 14:41; Jer 11:11.

<sup>24</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:236); Whitley (1979:67).

<sup>25</sup>Note that יָצָא in 7:18 is an unusual strong verb, used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in Jud 16:3; 1 Kgs 6:10. Elsewhere it is weak.

The opening line of the first half of the section, v.15b, consists of two equal halves (in terms of number of words):

יש צדיק אבד בצדקו  
יש רשע מאריך ברעתו

The closing line, v.18b, is similarly balanced:

כי ירא אלהים  
יצא את-כלם

This makes the disruption to the balance in vv.16-17 all the more striking. It should further be noted that, if **כי** is regarded as an introductory conjunction, there is a remarkable similarity in the construction of the two halves of v.18b, which contain 8 letters each. If the *maqep* is removed, the parallel *yodh* and *aleph* at the beginning and end of the first word in each, and the *aleph* and *mem* in the second word might be shown thus:

כי  
ירא אלהים  
יצא את-כלם

This illustrates in a literary fashion the close connection the author is establishing between the two clauses.

Vv.19-22 serve to indicate that nobody is perfect, perhaps calling into question the statement starting **טוב אשר** at the end of vv.15b-18. This half of the passage consists of a positive statement in v.19, which is modified in v.20; and a cautionary admonition in v.21, supported by the statement in v.22. As we have seen on a number of occasions previously, the two occurrences of **כי** seem to function differently, the first being asseverative, 'surely', and the second bearing the usual sense, 'because'.

Of v.19, Barton (1912:144) argues, 'It is impossible to find any intelligent connection for this verse with the preceding context. It is undoubtedly an interpolation by the glossator who was interested in proverbs.' Whybray (1989a:121) also thinks that 'there is no continuity of thought here at all', while Fox (1989:232) moves the verse to follow v.12 because 'this saying is irrelevant in its current place and interrupts the connection between v18 and v20'. In fact, both vv.19,20 interrupt this passage insofar as neither of them displays the second person expressions which are so prevalent in vv.16-18,21-22. V.18 is also quite ironic in view of the discussion in 9:13-16 about the poor wise man.



In the context of 7:15b-22, v.19 picks up on the advice in v.16, ואל-תתחכם יותר, and affirms that nonetheless wisdom is a good thing. However, falling between vv.18,20 it contributes to the confusion surrounding the terms טוב, צדיק, חכם, ירא אלהים. The question arises as to the connection between those who fear God, the wise, the righteous and those who do good. The quick change from one term to another certainly seems to suggest at least some connection, perhaps even indicating that they are being used as near-synonyms. A similar question arises in 4:17-5:5 and 9:17-10:5.

The syntax of v.20 is somewhat strange, reversing the order of אדם and אין as they appear in a similar phrase in 1 Kgs 8:46:

Qoh 7:20 כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא

1 Kgs 8:46 כי אין אדם אשר לא-יחטא

However, we find a similar word order in Exod 5:16:

Qoh 7:20 אדם אין צדיק בארץ  
Exod 5:16 תבן אין נתן לעבדיך

As clearly in Exod 5:16, so also in Qoh 7:20 the unusual position of the word אין serves to emphasise that there is *none*: 'there is *no* righteous person'<sup>26</sup>. This may support the admonition in v.16, but it creates a tension with v.15bα:

v.15 יש צדיק אבד בצדקו  
v.20 אין צדיק בארץ

However, such tensions are not without precedent in the Hebrew Bible, as for example between Prov 20:7 and v.9:

v.7 מתהלך בתמו צדיק אשרי בניו אחריו  
v.9 מי-יאמר זכיתי לבי טהרתי מחטאתי

Vv.21,22 seem to develop the notion that nobody is without sin by offering an example which, by abundant use of the second person, the reader is presumably expected to apply to him- or herself. Besides the admonition אל-תתן, the second person singular pronominal suffix occurs four times, the second person singular pronoun is used, and there is one second person singular perfect and one imperfect verb.

The verb אל-תתן in the first half of v.21 is held back to the end of the phrase which places greater emphasis on it, and also creates a sense of suspense. This is further heightened

<sup>26</sup>Ps 143:2 conveys similar sentiments.

by the fact that while כל-הדברים appears at the beginning of the verse, and the verb ידברו two words later, it is not until the end of the verse that it is revealed who spoke the words. The verbs ידע and קללת in the two halves of v.22 are also held back towards the end of each half. Indeed, the important elements in the two verses occur at the end of each half of the verses, so that a comparison can be drawn between them thus:

...אל-תתן לבך...את-עבדך מקללך  
...ידע לבך...את-קללת אחרים

These phrases contain the second person elements. Most notable are the final clauses of identical length, where the servant's curse and 'your' curse are compared. There is a play on the consonants את which give the object marker in v.21 and the second person pronoun in v.22. This again draws attention to 'you'.

There is also a play on the three occurrences in these two verses of the words אשר and גם<sup>27</sup>. גם is used in three different ways, גם, כי גם and אשר גם, but each time bears the sense of 'also'. Its use twice in v.22 is very emphatic, perhaps stressing that you, the reader, are no better. By contrast, אשר seems to bear a different meaning each time: אשר ידברו should be rendered 'all the words *that* are said'; אשר לא-תשמע probably means '*lest* you hear'; and אשר גם-את might be translated '*because* you also'. This illustrates the author's capacity to use repeated words for emphasis, but also to use the same word to mean different things.

The uncertainty over what is 'good' in 7:1-8,9-14 is expanded in vv.15-22 to include uncertainty over what it means to be 'righteous' or 'wicked', 'wise' or 'foolish', a 'God-fearer' or a 'sinner'.

#### 13.1.4 7:23-29

אחכמה in v.23 is the only instance of the cohortative in Qohelet. It may express determination, indicating that the author strove determinedly to achieve wisdom<sup>28</sup>. However, the statement at the end of the verse, והיא רחוקה ממני, seems to contradict the assertions earlier in the book<sup>29</sup>:

<sup>27</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:128-34,138-49).

<sup>28</sup>Schoors (1992:89-90) renders the clause, 'I want to be wise.'

<sup>29</sup>Fox and Porten (1978:27) assert,

It does seem that Qohelet is using HKM in two different ways here, and in so doing is presenting a semantic paradox: He used wisdom in investigating the world yet could not become wise. He was a wise man who did not have wisdom.



הוספתי חכמה על כל-אשר היה לפני על-ירושלם	1:16
ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת	1:16
וגדלתי והוספתי מכל שהיה לפני בירושלם אף חכמה עמדה לי	2:9
ולמה חכמתי אני אז יותר	2:15
וישלט בכל-עמלי שעמלתי ושחכמתי תחת השמש	2:19

In these verses the author seems unambiguously to claim for him- or herself great wisdom, and this is evidenced by his/her use of wisdom in the examination of life described in chs.1,2:

ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה	1:13
ולבי נחג בחכמה	2:3
וגדלתי והוספתי מכל שהיה לפני בירושלם אף חכמה עמדה לי	2:9

However, (s)he also seems in chs.1,2 to be seeking to understand and experience wisdom:

ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה	1:17
ופניתי אני לראות חכמה	2:12

This is more in line with the statement in 7:23, אמרתי אחכמה.

The use of מה-שהיה in v.24 sits awkwardly with the other occurrences of מה-שהיה and מה-(ש)יהיה. Its sentiments are closer to the verses asserting human inability to know the future, but they all use the imperfect, יהיה:

מי יביאנו לראות	במה שיהיה	3:22
מי יגיד לאדם	מה- יהיה	6:12
רחוק	מה- שהיה ועמק עמק	7:24
איננו ידע	מה- שיהיה	8:7
לא-ידע האדם	מה- שיהיה	10:14
לא תדע	מה- יהיה	11:2

By contrast, the remaining occurrences of the phrase מה-שהיה assert that what is now has already been (or been named in 6:10), and the verses seem to imply that people should be able to predict the future by reference to the past:

מה-שהיה	הוא שיהיה	1:9
מה-שהיה כבר	הוא	3:15
מה-שהיה כבר	נקרא שמו	6:10

7:25 picks up on a number of verses from chs.1,2<sup>30</sup>:

ונתתי את-לבי	לדרוש ולתור	בחכמה	1:13
ואתנה לבי לדעת		חכמה	1:17a
ופניתי אני לראות		חכמה	2:12a
סבותי אני ולבי לדעת ולתור ובקש		חכמה וחשבון	7:25a
ו-דעת	חוללות ושכלות		1:17b
	והוללות וסכלות		2:12b
ולדעת רשע כסל	והסכלות הוללות		7:25b

<sup>30</sup>7:25 also displays noun-endings typical of these early chapters, and unusual or unique in the Hebrew Bible: חשבון; סכלות; הוללות (-ot apparently used as a singular ending). Cf Schoors (1992:63-7).

It serves to combine the elements of the earlier verses, except that **הוללות** and **סכלות** are reversed. It also introduces four new elements, **בקש**, **חשבון**, **רשע** and **כסל**. **חשבון** and **בקש** are important aspects of this passage, occurring three times each.

The meaning of **חשבון** is not altogether clear. The singular occurs only here and in Qoh 9:10 in the Hebrew Bible, and the plural occurs in Qoh 7:29 and elsewhere only in 2 Chr 26:15. The root **חשב** occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning 'think, account, devise', and **חשבון** itself occurs in late Hebrew and Aramaic<sup>31</sup> with the sense of 'reckoning, calculation'. BDB (pp.363,4) proposes that the plural, which seems in both cases to mean something like 'devices, inventions', is from a different word. This certainly seems to be the meaning in 2 Chr 26:15 where it occurs in the phrase **ויעש בירושלם חשבנות מחשבת חושב**, meaning something like, 'and in Jerusalem he made inventions invented by inventors'. However, this is not totally divorced from the notion of calculating or accounting, and it may be that this sense is intended in 7:29. It seems that **חשבון** in vv.25,27 indicates the result of calculation - i.e. the sum. This is most clear in the phrase in v.27, **אחת לאחת למצא חשבון**. However, in 9:10 **חשבון** seems to refer to the act of calculating. Fox and Porten (1978:30) assert that '*hesbon* designates both the process of reckoning and the answer arrived at by the reckoning.'

V.25 consists of the introductory phrase **סבותי אני ולבי** followed by two parallel clauses, one positive and one negative:

**לדעת ולתור ובקש חכמה וחשבון**  
**ו-לדעת רשע כסל והסכלות הוללות**

Each half has 5 words, the first of which is **לדעת**, and 23 letters. Both halves also contain two words which seem to be synonymous, **ולתור** and **ובקש** in the first half, and **כסל** and **סכלות** in the second. Beyond this they are quite different. The first half contains three infinitive verbs, although there is no apparent reason why the preposition **ל-** is dropped from the last of these, and two nouns. The second half consists of one infinitive verb and four nouns. However, it is unclear how these four nouns should be read. It is possible that we have here a list of four objects all governed by **לדעת**: 'and to know evil, folly, and foolishness, [and] madness'. This

<sup>31</sup>E.g., Ben Sira 42:3; Shab 150a.



is the translation Fox (1989:237,239) adopts. In support of this we might note that in 1:17 and 2:12 הוללות and סכלות/שכלות seem to be listed as separate items:

ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות	1:17
ופניתי אני לראות חכמה והוללות וסכלות	2:12

But in this case the *zaqeph* is a problem, as is the *waw* before only the third item, and the definite article also only on that item. In addition, it also raises the question why two words with near-identical, if not identical, meaning are both used in the same list.

Alternatively, both pairs may be in a construct relationship: 'and to know the evil of folly, and the foolishness of madness.' This is how Ogden (1987:119,120) interprets the verse<sup>32</sup>. However, madness may be inescapable, in which case it seems inappropriate to describe it as foolish, and folly may be quite innocent, and therefore hardly deserving the term evil. It would, however, explain the *zaqeph*, but still leaves the problem of the definite article only in והסכלות.

NEB, REB and NIV transpose the terms of the construct relationships so that they read, 'and to know the folly of evil, and the madness of foolishness'. In this case the definite article might serve to indicate that הסכלות refers back to כסל, but this raises the question why two different roots are used to indicate the same thing.

A third possibility is that there are two sets of double accusatives: 'and to know that evil is folly, and foolishness is madness'. This is the approach taken by Barton (1912:146), Crenshaw (1988:144,146) and Gordis (1968:178,281), and it makes most sense of the verse, and explains the *zaqeph* and the *waw*. But it still leaves the problem of the definite article, unless הסכלות refers back to כסל: 'and to know that evil is folly, and *that* foolishness is madness'. Also we would expect to find אשר, -ש or כי following the verb, as is the case in 1:17; 2:14; 3:12,14. And again there is the problem of why two different roots are used: is there a difference between them; or are they used for variety; or are they, perhaps, designed to provoke the reader to question their meaning?

A further possibility is that הוללות is used adjectivally giving an expression meaning something like 'senseless foolishness'. In this case we might render this section of the verse, 'and to know evil, folly and senseless foolishness'.

<sup>32</sup>So also Schoors (1992:166-7,187-8).

The meaning of the verse may be greatly affected by the way this clause is understood. For example, 'to know evil, folly, and senseless foolishness' is very different from 'to know that evil is folly, and that folly is madness'. It may be that the author intends uncertainty over what the verse means.

מוֹצֵא, with which v.26 opens, is unusual because it is the only use of a participle with the first person in this passage - elsewhere the perfect is used, including all the first person occurrences of the verb מִצֵּא. It is also anomalous because it is pointed as a *lamedh he* verb rather than *lamedh aleph*, although this occurs quite often in the Hebrew Bible in general (see Ges<sup>K</sup>, 75rr) and Qohelet in particular. As Barton (1912:148) points out, 'in late Hebrew the participle is used instead of various forms of the verb,' and he concludes that 'here it is equivalent to a perfect.' Alternatively it might be the observation of a recurring fact, 'I find it always to be the case that...'

The introduction of הָאִשָּׁה in this verse seems out of place. There is nothing in the preceding verses which prepares the reader for it, and only the difficult v.28 continues the theme. The word אִשָּׁה occurs in only one other verse in Qohelet, 9:9, and the sentiments there seem to be different, רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֵּת. Depending on how the verse is read, it may be a warning against a particular type of woman 'whose heart is nets and snares, her hands are fetters' along the lines of such verses as Prov 5:3-5,20-22; 22:14; 23:27; etc.; or it may be a misogynistic attack on women-hood as a whole<sup>33</sup>, warning against *woman* 'because she is nets and her heart snares, her hands are fetters'. Or it may be that the verse is intended metaphorically, perhaps as an illustration of רֶשַׁע כֶּסֶל וְהַסְכָּלוֹת הַוָּלָלוֹת. This may also be the case in Prov 5. It may be intentionally ambiguous.

The expression אֲשֶׁר-הִיא adds to this ambiguity because it can be understood in three different ways. If אֲשֶׁר is read in its usual sense as 'who', then הִיא would appear to be a copula, 'who (she) is nets and her heart is snares, her hands are fetters.' The *waw* used only on חֲרָמִים לְבָהּ is a difficulty for this reading. Alternatively, אֲשֶׁר and הִיא together could be the antecedent of the pronominal suffix on לְבָהּ, so that the phrase might be rendered, 'whose heart is nets and snares, her hands are fetters'. On this reading the reader might have expected

<sup>33</sup>Garrett (1988), not herself a feminist, provides a conservative response to this text 'which, at a casual reading, appears to be perhaps the most misogynous passage of all.'



אסורים to be preceded by a *waw*. A third option is to take אשר as causal and היא as the subject: 'because she is nets and her heart is snares, [therefore] her hands are fetters.' In each case, the use of plural metaphors for the singular היא and לבה is strange, but the last option makes most sense of this anomaly because it points forward to the plural metaphor for the plural ידיה.

The last part of the verse may tie this passage in with the theme of 7:1-15a, which is picked up in vv.15b-22, of 'what is good', especially as the words טוב לפני האלהים ימלט occur at the centre of vv.23-29. It certainly picks up on ירא אלהים יצא כלם in v.18b, and may be ironic in light of the sentiments in v.20, אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה-טוב ולא יחטא.

The first line of v.27 introduces the theme of vv.27-29, 'finding'. The alternation between לא מצאתי and מצאתי carries the theme, but muddies the issue considerably because it is not clear what has, and what has not been found. In fact, it is the attempt to find חשבון, 'sum, solution', which is the main focus, this being emphasised by the occurrence of this word at the end of v.27 and the expression חשבנות רבים at the end of v.29. As soon as the theme is intimated, the result of that search is declared, אשר עוד-בקשה נפשי ולא מצאתי, and the on-going nature of the search constitutes the conclusion to the passage, והמה בקשו חשבנות רבים, perhaps indicating that people will *always* be trying to find solutions<sup>34</sup>. This is very much in line with the sentiments expressed in 8:17 by means of three occurrences of the verb מצא preceded each time by לא.

7:27-29 is highly ambiguous, because it is not clear at any point what has been found and what has not been found, and this despite the repeated admonition, ראה זה מצאתי<sup>35</sup>. The divisions in the MT, and also the structure we proposed above, actually hide the impossibility of the task facing the interpreter of an unpunctuated text. ראה זה מצאתי in v.27 is left hanging, the reader being required to do a considerable amount of work to figure out how it *might* relate to the rest of the passage. It *could* be picked up by the first אשר, in which case it would be parallel to ראה-זה מצאתי אשר in v.29, and give the translation, 'Qohelet said, "See this I

<sup>34</sup>Isaksson (1987:91) presents a present tense reading of v.28 which supports this last statement, 'which *I am still seeking* but have not found.' [Our emphasis]

<sup>35</sup>Murphy (1974:83,85) recognises some of the ambiguity,

The Hebrew text is ambiguous ... The ambiguity comes from the *asher* clause that begins 28. Does it provide a reference back to *hesbon* in 27, or does it begin a new statement?

Fox and Porten (1978:31), however, suggest emending אשר at the start of v.28 to אשה.

found by adding one thing to another to find the solution, that my inmost being had continually sought and not found." However, such a reading sits very uncomfortably with the MT verse division. Or **ראה זה מצאתי** might relate to the two clauses which occur at the centre of the passage, **אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי ואשה בכל-אלה לא מצאתי**, with the second half of v.27 and the first part of v.28 functioning as a parenthesis: 'Qohelet said, "See this I found (adding one thing to another to find the solution - which I had repeatedly not found), one man among a thousand I found, but a woman in all these I did not find.' Or it could refer to the preceding line, **אשר** at the beginning of v.28 pointing forwards rather than back: 'Qohelet said, "See this [i.e. the preceding] I found by adding one thing to another to find the solution." What I continually sought...'

In the above discussion, **ולא מצאתי** in v.28 was taken with the words that precede it, in accordance with the punctuation in MT. This could yield two interpretations: either Qohelet sought a solution and did not find it, or he sought but did not find [to be true?] the statement, **אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי ואשה בכל-אלה לא מצאתי**. The latter seems to treat this statement as a proverb which would expect general agreement, but with which the author disagrees. Such a reading makes some sense of the clause at the beginning of v.29, 'See this *alone* I found,' because **ראה זה מצאתי** at the beginning of v.27 might relate something Qohelet found *not* to be the case:

Qohelet said, "See this I found (adding one thing to another to find the sum) which I had continually sought, but found it not to be true, 'a man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I did not find'"<sup>36</sup>

Alternatively, **ראה זה מצאתי** could relate to v.26, in which case v.29 may refer back to the end of that verse:

Qohelet said, "See this [i.e. the preceding] I found to be true by adding one thing to another to find the sum." What I continually sought but did not find [to be true] is, "a man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I did not find." This alone I found, that...

However, **ולא מצאתי** might refer forward to **אדם אחד מאלף**, particularly as the verb usually precedes the object in Hebrew. The *waw* on **ואשה** is decidedly awkward on this reading, and would have to be viewed as asseverative. This would give the reading:

I did not find one man among a thousand, but I did find a woman among all these. This is not all I found - see, this I found, that...

<sup>36</sup>Cf Murphy (1993:135-6).



לבד at the start of v.29 is difficult and is not used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as it is here. However, it makes at least as much sense read this way as it does the way it is usually understood, and its position in the clause, לא מצאתי לבד, rather than לבד ראה-זה מצאתי, is more in line with normal Hebrew grammar.

A further problem faces the interpreter in the central part of this passage: does אשה mean 'woman' or 'wife'? It may be that the author found a man but not a woman; or that he found a male companion but not a wife, or that (s)he did not find a man but did find a woman; or that he did not find a male companion but did find a wife. However אשה is understood, the use of אדם is noteworthy because elsewhere it usually indicates 'people' rather than men or a man. If the author intended to indicate specifically 'a man', the word איש could have been used<sup>37</sup>. A point which both Ogden (1987:122) and Whybray (1989a:127) make, and which is usually ignored, is that the author does not state what *kind* of person was sought. It is usually assumed that it is a good or righteous person whom the author is looking for, but this is not actually said.

The interpretation of v.29 mainly revolves around on two issues: whether the *waw* is read as the conjunction, 'and', or as the adversative, 'but'; and how חשבנות is understood. The use of חשבנות recalls the two occurrences earlier in the passage: ובקש חכמה וחשבון in v.25, and אחת לאחת למצא חשבון in v.27. In these two instances it seems to convey the notion of a conclusion reached by means of carefully compiling data. If such is the case here, it seems to be no bad thing. However, the verb חשב often bears the sense of devising or planning, and this seems to be what is conveyed in the only other occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of the plural noun חשבנות, in 2 Chr 26:15. The root is frequently used to describe the devising of evil by human beings, as, for example, in Gen 6:5-6<sup>38</sup>, which could have a bearing on Qoh 7:29:

וירא יהוה כי רבה רעת האדם בארץ וכל-יצר מחשבת לבו רק רע כל-היום  
וינחם יהוה כי עשה את-האדם בארץ ויתעצב אל-לבו

<sup>37</sup>Fox and Porten (1978:33) see a connection here with Gen 2-3,

Recognizing that story in the background helps explain the use of 'adam instead of 'is as the counterpart of 'issa. The choice of the pair 'adam-'issa is reflex of the use of that pair in Gen 2-3; the use of 'adam to mean *vir* occurs only in that story. Furthermore, the image of the woman as a *trap* for man, so strongly emphasised in v.26, is in accord with the picture we get in Gen 3, where Adam is trapped into sin by the woman.

Cf Clemens (1994, esp.p.7); Qoh. Rab. and Targ.

<sup>38</sup>See also, e.g., Ez 38:10; Ps 35:4; 140:3; etc., and especially Jer 48:2, where we read, בחשבון חשבו עליה רעה.

However, the clause **וְאַתֶּם חִשְׁבַתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים חֲשַׁבָה לְטָבָה** in Gen 50:20 shows that the root itself is neutral, conveying neither negative nor positive connotations. In Qoh 7:29, too, the word is probably neutral, and will be understood positively or negatively depending on how the *waw* is read: either, 'God made people upright, *but* they sought many schemes [of their own];' or, 'God made people upright, *and* they sought many solutions.' If the former applies, the author seems to be arguing that while God made people upright, they turned from his ways and sought their own schemes; if the latter, then (s)he seems to argue that people seek to make much of what God has given them.

However precisely the second half of 7:29 is understood, it is noteworthy that in this last verse of the passage is the only occurrence of **מִצְאָתִי** the object of which is clear - the other occurrences are all highly ambiguous. Perhaps, then, this is the only thing the author can claim to have found, that 'God made people upright'. Nonetheless, there is considerable irony in the verse in light of the statements **רָאָה אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי מִי יוּכַל לִתְקַן אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוּ** in 7:13, and **אָדָם אֵין צָדִיק בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה-טוֹב וְלֹא יִחְטָא** in v.20.

### 13.1.5 8:1-8

Whybray does not hold out much hope for a definitive interpretation of 8:1. He says (1989:128), 'This verse presents almost insuperable difficulties to the interpreter with regard both to its intrinsic meaning and its connection with its context.' Although in MT it is the first verse of a new chapter, commentators are divided on whether it does start a new section<sup>39</sup>, or conclude the previous section<sup>40</sup>, or both<sup>41</sup>, and Barton (1912:149) regards it as the work of a glossator. Crenshaw (1988:149) asks the question, 'Where does the unit begin?', then suggests 'The initial verse *may* be a clever allusion to the previous section, or it *may* ask whether anyone knows the true meaning of the aphorism about wisdom illuminating one's face' [our emphasis]. In view of the ambiguities we have met so far in Qohelet, it may be that *both* Crenshaw's suggestions apply, and that the verse is designed to refer to both the preceding section and the following verses, acting as a bridge between them. The reference to wisdom ties

<sup>39</sup>E.g., Davidson (1986:56); Gordis (1968:286-287); Ogden (1987:127-128).

<sup>40</sup>E.g., Eaton (1983:117); Loader (1986:93).

<sup>41</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:244-246).



in with 7:23, and the question **מי יודע פֿשר דבר** could be an allusion to the search for חשבנות in 7:25,27,29. But **מי יודע** and **פֿשר דבר** also anticipate important aspects of 8:1-8.

V.1 poses the same problem that occurs in 7:23. The balance of the two parts of the first half of the verse suggests that the wise person knows the interpretation of a word/thing, but the reader might expect the answer to **מי יודע פֿשר דבר** to be 'nobody', in which case one must conclude that nobody is wise. However, the second half of the verse then goes on to describe a person's wisdom. Fox (1989:244) recognises this problem, and argues that the MT should be emended from **מי כהחכם** to **מי כה חכם**, with appropriate repointing so that the phrase may be rendered, 'who is *thus* wise'. He says,

The Massoretic word division in v.1a $\alpha$  produces a sentence that evaluates the wise man positively: no one (else) is like the wise man. But since v.1a $\beta$  can only mean that no one knows the meaning of a matter, we require a negative evaluation also in v.1a $\alpha$ , i.e. a statement of the limits of the wise man's capacity for understanding. [Our emphasis]

But it might be possible to avoid the tension by interpreting the verse thus: 'Who *else* is like the wise person? And who *but the wise person* knows the interpretation of a thing/word? A person's wisdom...'

The word **פֿשר** does not occur elsewhere in Qohelet or in biblical Hebrew generally. However, it is a common Aramaic word occurring frequently in Dan. in the context of the interpretation of dreams<sup>42</sup>. The word **פתרון** is used in Gen 40:5, also in relation to interpreting dreams, and this may be an equivalent term.

In light of the probable meaning of **פֿשר** as 'interpretation', the translation 'word' would seem highly appropriate for **דבר**. The sense of the phrase might then be 'who [but the wise man?] really understands what is said?' However, the phrase could also be understood to ask, 'who can interpret the *things* that happen in the world?' The root **דבר** is used in greater concentration in the 8:1-5 than anywhere else in the book: five out of a total of thirty-two occurrences are in these verses. In v.2 it appears in the expression **על דברת**; in vv.3,5 we find **דבר רע**; and **דבר-מלך** occurs in v.4. **דבר** in this last expression seems best rendered as 'word'; **דבר רע** could be translated either 'matter' or 'word', but the former seems to make more sense of the verses. Thus it would appear that in 8:1-8 **דבר** is used in three different ways. There is considerable irony in the difficulty of precise interpretation of the phrase 'who knows the interpretation of a word/thing!'

<sup>42</sup>Dan 2:4,5,6,7,9,16,24,25,26,30,36,45; 4:4,6,15,16,21; 5:12,16; etc.

The final word of the verse is also difficult because it has the consonants of a *lamedh aleph* verb, but is pointed as a *lamedh he* verb. It is usually read as יִשְׁנֶה with the MT pointing<sup>43</sup>, 'and the hardness of his face is changed', but the expression עוֹ פָּנִים, where עוֹ is pointed with the *holem*, occurs nowhere else. Some of the versions point עוֹ with a *patah*, and this is found also in Deut 28:50 and Dan 8:23. If the clause is read taking this into account along with repointing the verb to read as a *lamedh aleph*, a quite different reading is obtained, 'the hard-faced are hated.' Again the clause may be deliberately ambiguous.

As Crenshaw (1988:150) remarks regarding 8:2, 'The initial *'ani* constitutes the major problem of this verse'. The verb שְׁמֹר is an imperative, and hence inappropriate with אֲנִי. We would require either a first person verb as in v.15, or the participial form as in v.12. Three solutions are proposed to this problem. Firstly, there may be a verb omitted, or assumed: אֲמַרְתִּי אֲנִי occurs five times elsewhere (2:1,15; 3:17,18; 9:16), and אֲמַרְתִּי appears without the pronoun in 8:14. Perhaps this is the verb that has been omitted. However, Gordis (1968:288) points out a possible parallel in Rabbinic literature where the first person pronoun is used without a verb to introduce a statement.

Secondly, the word אֲנִי might be an error which should be emended. LXX seems to assume אַת, the object marker. By contrast, Whitley (1979:71) draws parallels from Aramaic to show that 'it is thus *clear* that אֲנִי פִי-מֶלֶךְ underlies אֲנִי פִי-מֶלֶךְ [our emphasis]. He renders the clause 'in the presence of the king'. Whybray (1989a:130) notes another possibility, that the word be emended to בְּנִי, 'my son'. We find similar use of this word several times in the Prov 1-7<sup>44</sup>, but in Qohelet it occurs only in 12:12.

A third possibility also requires emending אֲנִי. Fox (1989:245-246) suggests that אֲנִי belongs at the end of v.1, and that יִשְׁנֶה אֲנִי should be emended to יִשְׁנֶה אֲנִי.

פִּי-מֶלֶךְ seems to mean much the same as דְּבַר-מֶלֶךְ in v.4. If this is the case, פִּי is used metaphorically to indicate the words or commands of the king which come from his mouth, rather than referring to his mouth itself. This is a common use of the word in the Hebrew Bible, where it is often used of God's commands<sup>45</sup>. The phrase would then mean 'keep the

<sup>43</sup>In fact, Schoors (1992:27) argues, 'The verb intended is *undoubtedly* יִשְׁנֶה.' [Our emphasis] Schoors (1992:98-9) suggests that other examples of confusion between *lamedh he* and *lamedh aleph* verbs are found in 2:26; 7:26; 8:12; 9:2,18; 10:5.

<sup>44</sup>E.g., 1:8,10,15; 2:1; 3:1,11; etc.

<sup>45</sup>E.g., Num 14:41; 1 Sam 15:24; Prov 8:29; etc.



king's commands', or 'observe what the king says'. However, it is possible, as Whybray (1989a:130) points out, to render the phrase, 'watch the king's mouth', or 'watch the king's face', perhaps to assess his mood.

שבועת אלהים may mean 'God's oath'. This might indicate that one should observe the king's command because his authority is given by divine decree. Or it may be a hint that 'king' is being used as a metaphor for God, in which case the sentiments of 8:1-8 would be very close to those expressed in 4:17-5:6. Alternatively, it may be an oath, perhaps of loyalty to the king, sworn before God: thus 'sacred oath' in RSV<sup>46</sup>.

RSV, NEB, REB and a number of commentators<sup>47</sup>, take the first two words of v.3 at the end of v.2, so that the second half of v.2 reads, ועל דברת שבועת אלהים אל-תבהל. Without these two words the second half must continue the thought of the first, because there is no second verb, and hence the waw must, as Gordis (1968:288) suggests, 'emphasize the reason, "and that because of the oath of God"'<sup>48</sup>. However, אל-תבהל may be translated in different ways: either 'do not rush'<sup>49</sup>, or 'do not be dismayed'<sup>50</sup>. The verb בהל is used in two other verses in Qohelet: 5:1 opens with אל-תבהל על-פיך, and 7:9 starts אל-תבהל ברוחך לכעוס. That בהל is only used elsewhere in the book in this way, and with the meaning 'do not rush', lends support to the argument that it belongs at the beginning of v.3 with the same meaning. However, it is used in the piel in 5:1 and 7:9 but the niph'al form appears here. It may be that the niph'al indicates a passive reading, 'do not *be* dismayed', and in fact this is the usual meaning of the niph'al<sup>51</sup> (although in Prov 28:22 it does seem to bear the meaning 'rush'). But the piel also usually means 'dismay, terrify'<sup>52</sup>, and probably only bears the sense of 'rush, hasten' in Qohelet; Esth 2:9 and 2 Chr 35:21. It may be a late usage applying to both the piel and the niph'al forms of the verb. The translation 'do not be dismayed' is more appropriate if the admonition concludes v.2, while 'do not hasten' fits the context of v.3 better. It makes a considerable difference to both verses how it is understood, giving the translation either, 'Heed

<sup>46</sup>See also Exod 22:10; 2 Sam 21:7; 1 Kgs 2:43.

<sup>47</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:244-246).

<sup>48</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:127). He deals with the emphatic waw in some detail (1992:124-8).

<sup>49</sup>See Barton (1912:149); Fox (1989:244-246); Gordis (1968:288); Ogden (1987:129); Whybray (1989:130) and NEB, REB and NIV.

<sup>50</sup>See Crenshaw (1988:148); RSV.

<sup>51</sup>See, e.g., Gen 45:3; Judg 20:41; 1 Sam 28:21; 2 Sam 4:1; etc.

<sup>52</sup>See, e.g., Ps 2:5; Job 22:10; Dan 11:44; 2 Chr 32:18; etc.

the king's words, and this because of your sacred oath. Do not rush to leave his presence...;' or, 'Heed the king's words, but on account of your sacred oath do not despair. Go from the king's presence...' Perhaps this is a further example of the difficulty of 'interpreting words' which contributes to the ambiguity of this book.

אל-תעמד may be rendered, 'do not stand', the sense עמד has in 4:12,15. If the previous section of the verse suggests leaving the king's presence, the second half of the verse may give the reason for this advice: 'do not stand in a bad situation', דבר רע referring to being in the presence of the king. However, עמד may also be rendered 'continue, persist in', as in 1:4; 2:9. This is also appropriate if דבר רע refers to being in the king's presence, and in this case the final clause may expand דבר רע by explaining that the king acts on his whim.

However, this seems inappropriate if the advice is 'not to rush from the king's presence'. In this case דבר רע may refer to something done by the person who is in the king's presence, or perhaps something (s)he said, which the author advises (s)he cease. Thus Waldman (1979) argues that דבר רע 'in this context has to do with conspiracy and rebellion against the king.' The final clause may warn that the king has the power to carry out punishment for wrongdoing, which may be supported by the statement in v.6, כי לכל-חפץ יש עת ומשפט, where חפץ is used again. This reading of דבר רע might also be supported by reference to v.5, דבר-מלך לא ידע דבר רע. שומר מצוה here could be synonymous with פי-מלך in v.2, and דבר-מלך in v.4.

Hence we have two distinct readings of 8:3: '...do not be dismayed. Leave his presence, do not continue with a bad thing, for he does whatever he wishes;' or, 'Do not rush to leave the king's presence, do not persist in wrongdoing because what the king plans he does.' The ambiguity of חפץ adds to the uncertainty over the interpretation of the verse.

The admonition אל-תעמד בדבר רע is followed by two statements and a (rhetorical?) question which state much the same thing in three different ways. Moreover, the three clauses all contain precisely the same number of letters (15):

אל-תעמד בדבר רע  
כי כל-אשר יחפץ יעשה  
באשר דבר-מלך שלטון  
ומי יאמר-לו מה-תעשה



There may be a play on the word דבר, it being used to mean two different things in the first and third clauses, while two different words, דבר in the third clause and אמר in the fourth, are used to mean the same thing. אשר is used in two different ways.

The question is strikingly similar to a phrase addressed to God in Job 9:12,

מה-תעשה	ומי יאמר-לו	Qoh 8:4
מה-תעשה	מי-יאמר אליו	Job 9:12

Perhaps this is a further hint that 'king' is a metaphor for God. Such a metaphor is not unusual in the Hebrew Bible, especially in Pss. where it is sometimes difficult to discern whether references to 'the king' indicate an earthly king or Yahweh<sup>53</sup>.

V.5 picks up on the verb שמר from v.2 and דבר רע from v.3, and מצוה may be synonymous with פי-מלך in v.2, דבר-מלך in v.4, and possibly also כל-אשר יחפץ in v.3. We should note that מצוה is usually applied in the Hebrew Bible to commands from God, and it may be that this serves to further the impression given by the allusion to Job 9:12 in v.4 that these verses refer to God. מצוה occurs only once more in Qohelet, in 12:13-14, where it is specifically related to God, and judgment is also mentioned.

8:5 displays a chiasmic structure whereby שומר מצוה, with which the verse opens, is in parallel with לב חכם at the end of the verse; לא ידע, in the middle of the first half, is set against ידע, in the middle of the second half; and דבר רע, at the end of the first half, is contrasted to ועת ומשפט, at the beginning of the second half:

שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם

The two halves of the verse also parallel each other in terms of the number of letter in each expression, such that לא ידע and ידע are highlighted:

שומר מצוה	לא ידע	דבר רע
ועת ומשפט	ידע	לב חכם

This places particular emphasis on what is and what is not known - an increasingly important theme in the second half of Qohelet.

The first half of the verse clearly develops the theme of vv.2-4, but it does little to elucidate these verses: it could mean that the one who keeps the command avoids the unpleasantness which the king inflicts on those who do not submit to his every wish; or it

<sup>53</sup>E.g., Deut 33:5; Pss 5:3; 10:16; 29:10; 149:2; etc.

might suggest that those who keep the command do not themselves perpetrate wrong, or that they do not know a harmful or evil word. As in v.3, it is not made clear whether דבר רע is caused by the king or by disobedient subjects.

The main problem in interpreting the second half of the v.5 is in determining what the expression ועת ומשפט means. Should it be read 'time and judgment', which would certainly be appropriate when the expression occurs in v.6; or should the text be emended by removing the second *waw* to leave the construct expression 'a time of judgment'; or is it a hendiadys meaning 'a time of judgment'? The MT uses precisely the same expression in v.6, but LXX renders the first occurrence *καιρον κρισεως* and the second *καιρος και κρισις*. An alternative which is followed by RSV, NEB, REB and NIV<sup>54</sup>, is to render משפט as 'way' or 'manner', a meaning the word does bear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>55</sup>. The other occurrences in Qohelet (3:16; 5:7; 11:9; 12:14; and cf 3:17) all appear to conform to the forensic sense of the word.

If ועת ומשפט does mean 'time of judgment', this verse seems to claim that a wise person knows when judgment will be, while v.7 states that no-one knows what is to be. Of course this is not a problem if one holds that nobody is wise as v.1 seems to assert, but we noted above that v.2 assumes that there are people who possess wisdom. However, the clause could be understood to mean that a wise person knows that there *will be* a time of judgment, rather than knowing specifically *when* that judgment will occur. This might relate back to the earlier verses, implying that one can be sure a breach of the king's (or of God's?) commands will be dealt with at an appropriate time. The reader may recall the similar sentiments about God in 3:17, את-הצדיק ואת-הרשע ישפט האלהים כי-עת לכל חפץ ועל כל-המעשה שם.

The first part of v.6 bears a particular similarity to 3:17, and also 3:1, in its use of the expression לכל-חפץ and the word עת, although these are all slightly different:

לכל זמן	ועת לכל-חפץ	תחת השמים	3:1
	עת לכל-חפץ	ועל כל-המעשה שם	3:17
	לכל-חפץ יש עת ומשפט		8:6

The word is usually understood to mean 'matter' in 8:6, as also in 3:1,17. But it may be that the author intends here to play on its positive connotations. It may be that חפץ in this verse

<sup>54</sup>See also Whybray (1989:131-132); Ogden (1987:130-131).

<sup>55</sup>E.g., Judg 13:12; 1 Sam 2:13; 2 Kgs 1:7.



and in v.3 is used as a contrast to דבר רע in vv.3,5. That there is 'time and judgment', or 'a time of judgment', or perhaps 'a time and a way' for both bad things and for pleasures again recalls 3:17 and also 12:14. Indeed, a comparison of 8:3c and 8:6a in light of the sentiments of 3:17 and 12:14, gives 8:3,4 a rather different complexion:

את-הצדיק ואת-הרשע ישפט האלהים כי-עת לכל חפץ ועל כל-המעשה שם	3:17
כל-אשר יחפץ יעשה	8:3
לכל-חפץ יש עת ומשפט	8:6
את-כל מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע	12:14

רעת האדם in the second half of v.6 may be intended as a contrast to כל-חפץ in the first half<sup>56</sup>. In this case they should probably be rendered 'a person's misfortune' and 'all pleasures'. The final two words of the verse, רבה עליו, might then either indicate that such misfortunes are numerous, or that they weigh a person down. This is also the case in 6:1, the only other verse where the expression רבה על- occurs. However, רעת האדם might also be taken to refer to the evil deeds a person commits.

If a contrast is drawn between the two halves of v.6, it could be understood in different ways. It might imply that there is some comfort for the person who is weighed down because of an oppressive king in the knowledge that all his 'pleasure' will be judged in time. Or it could indicate that while there is an appropriate time and way for all pleasures, a person may still be weighed down by misfortune.

One of the major difficulties in interpreting vv.6-7 is that all four clauses in these two verses start with כי:

כי לכל-חפץ יש עת ומשפט  
 כי-רעת האדם רבה עליו  
 כי-איננו ידע מה-שיהיה  
 כי כאשר יהיה מי יגיד לו

On a number of occasions in Qohelet a statement is followed by two or three clauses or verses starting with כי, but it is not at all clear how the four occurrences here function. It may be that each clause offers an explanation of the previous one; or all four clauses may be responses to v.5; or כי may be asseverative, such that the four clauses are simply juxtaposed without any explicit link between them; or כי might function in different ways in the four clauses. None of these provides a totally satisfactory reading, and it may be that the reader is

<sup>56</sup>But a number of manuscripts read רעת, and this seems to underlie the word *γλωσσις* in the LXX.

left to try to work out for her- or himself how the four clauses relate to each other and to the preceding verses<sup>57</sup>.

There are four parts to 8:8, starting either with אין or לא:

אין אדם שליט ברוח לכלוא את-הרוח  
ואין שלטון ביום המות  
ואין משלחת במלחמה  
ולא-ימלט רשע את-בעליו:

The effect is a verse that very strongly stresses limitations on human power, which added to the emphasis in v.7 on the inability of people to know the future, clearly illustrates human weakness and their lack of control over the future.

The key words in these clauses, that are modified by אין/לא, all show marked similarity in their consonants:

(אדם) שליט  
שלטון  
משלחת  
ימלט

The similarities between these might be more clearly shown thus:

שליט  
של-טון  
משלחת  
ימ-ל-ט

The 'sh', 'l' and 't' sounds are maintained throughout the first three words, then 'l' and 't' continue into the final word which also picks up the 'm' sound from the previous section. This helps to maintain a sense of continuity through the verse, and establishes a link between the four words.

There is a certain irony in the use of שליט and שלטון in this verse to indicate human limitations, in light of the fact that it is precisely שלט given or not given by God which makes the difference between the very positive tone of 5:17-18 and the very negative tone of 6:1-2. The word שלטון is used elsewhere only in 8:4 in the phrase, דבר-מלך שלטון (it occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible). If a human king is the subject there, v.8 expresses limitations even to his power, but this verse may also support the contention that there is an allusion to God in v.4.

<sup>57</sup>Murphy (1992:xxx) writes,

When, for example, it [כִּי] is used four times in two verses (8:6-7; 9:4-5) or thrice in three verses (7:4-5; 2:24b-26), one almost despairs of catching the nuances, and it is difficult to find any agreement among translators.

Cf the discussion of the emphatic use of כִּי in Schoors (1992:103-10).



**משלחת** is found only here and in Ps 78:49 in biblical Hebrew. It is not clear what it means in Qoh 8:8. Ps 78:49 reads, **ישלח-בם חרון אפו עברה וזעם וצרה משלחת מלאכי רעים**, and **משלחת** seems in this verse to mean something like 'a deputation' - that is 'a company [of angels] *sent out* from God'. This seems inappropriate in our verse, and the closest parallel would appear to be 'discharge', that is 'a *sending away* from military service'. While discharge from military service is permitted in certain circumstances in Deut 20:5-8, the emphasis in this verse may be that discharge is not permitted in the battle, **במלחמה**. Perhaps the impression the author intends to convey is that in battle a person no longer has any control over his or her own destiny - it is not possible to ensure one's survival by gaining a discharge, because once the battle has begun this will not be permitted. This is a further limit on people's power over their own lives. Probably the unusual word **משלחת** was chosen because of its similarity to **ימלט** and **שלטון**, **שליט**.

BHS, along with Whitley (1979:73) suggests that **רשע** in the final part of the verse should be emended to **עשר** in line with 5:12, **עשר שמור לבעליו לרעתו**. It may be that the author is intentionally playing on the earlier verse, but also introducing a word that is a key element of the next section which focuses on evil deeds.

It may be that all four parts of this verse are allusions to death, and indicate that people, regardless of their situation, have no control over their death. This may mean that vv.5b-8 all refer in one way or another to death, even though it is not explicitly mentioned. The section 7:1-8:8 would then start and end with references to death, in between discussing what is 'good' for people during their lives.

## 13.2 Conclusions

The section 7:1-8:8 illustrates well some of the different types of ambiguity which appear in Qohelet. On a formal level, we noted the difficulty in discerning whether 6:12 should be considered part of this section or not; 7:1-14 is divided in various different ways by the commentators; it is unclear whether 7:23-24 relates to the preceding verses, the following verses - or both; 8:1 is sometimes taken as the continuation of 7:29, sometimes as the start of 8:1ff, and sometimes as a link between the two; and, as we shall see below, 8:9 may relate to

the earlier verses of ch.8, or introduce another section - or both. This is a very common feature of the book.

The treatment of the question in 6:12, 'what is good for people?', is highly ambiguous. One aspect of this ambiguity is the ambivalence displayed by the author to such things as birth, life and death; vexation; wisdom; wealth; etc. This is exacerbated by the reversals between 7:1-8 and 7:9-14. Another is the uncertainty over the precise meaning of such words as טוב, צדיק, חכמה, ירא האלהים and רעה, רשע, כסל/סכל, חטא: the ambiguity of these words causes uncertainty even over what the question 'what is *good* for people?' might *mean*. This is further complicated by the difficulty in grasping the implications of 7:15b-18, which is amply illustrated by the divergent interpretations offered by the commentators. As we noted above, nothing is stated clearly and simply, so that multiple interpretations are possible.

The confusion over exactly what *is* and what is *not* found in 7:25-29 makes this passage highly ambiguous as well. The reader is forced to work very hard to make sense of the passage, and must make his or her own decisions about how to divide the text into appropriate clauses: this leaves considerable room for different interpretations.

The phrase מי כהחכם ומי יודע פשר דבר in 8:1, with its different possible meanings, is highly appropriate towards the end of a section where interpretation is so difficult. The possibility that מלך might allude to God is also highly appropriate, and the ambiguity especially of vv.2,3 may represent the difficulty of knowing what response is 'good' before God.



## CHAPTER 14, The Deeds that are Performed Under the Sun (8:9-9:10)

### 14.1 Commentary

#### 14.1.1 8:9-14

8:9 is strikingly similar to, but nonetheless slightly different from, a number of verses in chs.1-2:

ונתתי את-לבי ... על	כל-	אשר נעשה	תחת השמים	1:13
ראיתי	את-כל	המעשים ש-	תחת השמש	1:14
אראה ...		אשר יעשו	תחת השמש	2:3
	בכל-	מעשי ש-	תחת השמש ...	2:11
		המעשה ש-	תחת השמש	2:17
את-כל-זה	ראיתי ונתון את-לבי ל-	מעשה אשר נעשה	תחת השמש	8:9

1:13,14 introduce the theme of 'what is done under heaven/the sun', and 8:9 does the same, combining 'I gave my heart' from 1:13 and 'I saw' from v.14. Indeed, 1:12-2:19 and 8:9-9:10 (passages of similar length, 370 words and 375 words respectively) deal most thoroughly with what is done on earth:

לכל- מעשה	אשר נעשה תחת השמש	8:9
	אשר נעשה על-הארץ	8:14
את-	אשר נעשה על-הארץ	8:16
את-	אשר נעשה תחת השמש	8:17b
בכל	אשר-נעשה תחת השמש	9:3
בכל	אשר-נעשה תחת השמש	9:6

The second half of 8:9 picks up עת (vv.5,6) and שלט (vv.4,8,8) from the previous passage and links them into the theme of this passage by the expression לרע לו - although רע in this verse seems to mean something like 'hurt' or 'harm', while in vv.11,12 it is used of 'evil' actions. את-כל-זה at the beginning of v.9 could refer either to the preceding verses or to what follows. The accents in MT are somewhat confusing in this regard. The first *zaqeph* seems to suggest that ונתון את-לבי is part of the same clause as את-כל-זה ראיתי. This is supported by the use of the infinitive absolute to continue the sense of the finite first person verb. In this case the first section of the verse would read, 'All this I have seen and given my mind to'. This makes good sense, but if we finish the next section of the verse at the *athnah* it seems to make little sense, 'All this I have seen and given my mind to all deeds which are done under the sun'. There are two ways round this problem: either we read the verse as though there were a *zaqeph* over ראיתי, 'All this I have seen [perhaps referring back to 8:1-8]; and I have given my mind to all the deeds which are done under the sun'; or as though the *athnah* were

under the עת, 'All this I have seen and given my mind to [referring either backwards or forwards or both]; for all the deeds which are done under the sun there is a time'.

The final part of the verse could fit either of the above readings. If this section begins with עת, עת אשר could be rendered 'at a time when', or simply 'while'. This would mean that even as the author was seeing and thinking about these things, people were still dominating others to their hurt. If the section begins with אשר, then אשר probably means 'because' and introduces an explanation of why the author gave so much thought to the things he had seen for which all had a time: 'because a person dominates another to his hurt'. In either case, it seems that while the author realised that all human beings have only limited power, what power they do have can be used to cause hurt.

Precisely who it is that is caused hurt is unclear. In the context it seems to make most sense to see the pronominal suffix as a reference to the person who is dominated, but it could also refer to the one who exercises this domination. Perhaps it is intentionally vague - possibly the author would have the reader consider that while the dominated person is hurt at one time, there is also a time when the dominating person will come to grief. This might then relate to the statement made in 8:5b-6a: ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם כי לכל-חפץ יש עת ומשפט.

Crenshaw (1988:154) writes of v.10, 'Interpretations of this verse have one thing in common: tentativeness.' Eaton (1983:121) suggests that 'In the Hebrew this is one of the most difficult passages in the book,' and other commentators variously describe it as 'meaningless'<sup>1</sup>, 'manifestly not in order'<sup>2</sup>, 'obscure and uncertain'<sup>3</sup>, having 'clearly suffered some corruption'<sup>4</sup>, etc. The NEB and REB presume an emendation from קברים to קרבים when they render the first part of the verse, 'it was then that I saw wicked men *approaching* and even entering the holy place.' Some commentators<sup>5</sup> also adopt this emendation, though there seems to be no good manuscript evidence for doing so. While the mention of 'burial' does seem strange here, the same applies to 6:3, and it may be that the author is playing on the great importance the Israelites seemed to place on proper burial<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, while death is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, it is alluded to, and becomes explicit in 9:1-6.

<sup>1</sup>Barton (1912:153); Fox (1989:249); Ogden (1987:135).

<sup>2</sup>Gordis (1968:294).

<sup>3</sup>Whitley (1979:74).

<sup>4</sup>Whybray (1989:135).

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:153); Serrano (1954:168-70); Whybray (1989:135).

<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., Jer 16:6. Cf Eichrodt (1967:212).



On the basis of LXX, and other ancient versions, some commentators<sup>7</sup> recommend emending **וּבְאוּ**, 'and they come/came', to **מִבְּאוֹיָם**, 'brought'. Gordis (1968:295) and Ogden (1987:135) suggest that the *mem* from **קְבָרִים** originally attached to **וּבְאוּ**. This is possible, but still leaves difficulty in explaining the next part of the verse. It could be that **וּבְאוּ** belongs with **יִהְיוּ** in a phrase meaning something like 'they come and go to (or possibly, came and went from) the holy place', or if **וּבְאוּ** is emended and attached to the previous clause we may have a phrase, 'they go out from the holy place'. In the latter case, the meaning would be 'thus I have seen the evil ones being brought to the grave, and they go out from the holy place'. This seems to be the best reading of the verse if we adhere to the MT punctuation and follow the emendation of **יִבְאוּ**. However, some commentators seem to take **יִהְיוּ** with the next part of the verse, some emending it as well, and others read the text as if there were a pause at **וּבְאוּ**.

As the MT stands the next part of the verse reads, 'and they are forgotten in the city', but the majority of commentators<sup>8</sup> follow LXX and implement the very minor emendation of **וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ** to **וְיִשְׁתַּבְּחוּ**, 'they are praised'. Some take **יִהְיוּ** as the beginning of the clause and render it, 'they go about and are praised (or priding themselves) in the city...' <sup>9</sup>, others emend **וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ** to **וְיִהְיוּ** so that it has much the same meaning as **וְיִשְׁתַּבְּחוּ** <sup>10</sup>. Some who emend **וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ** also read the verse as if there were a pause at **קְבָרִים**, and read the whole verse as applying to **רָשָׁעִים** <sup>11</sup>:

Thus I have seen the evil ones buried; and they came and went from the holy place, and they are praised in the city who acted thus.

The separation of **וּבְאוּ** and **יִהְיוּ**, and the fact that they are different forms of the verb is a difficulty for this reading. Other commentators read the words from **וּבְאוּ** to **עָשׂוּ** as applying to those who act rightly - as opposed to **רָשָׁעִים** earlier in the verse <sup>12</sup>:

Thus I have seen the evil ones buried; and those who act rightly come and go to the holy place, but are forgotten in the city.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:155); Fox (1989:249,250); Gordis (1968:295); Loader (1986:99); Ogden (1987:135).

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:155); Crenshaw (1988:153); Eaton (1983:122); Gordis (1968:295); Ogden (1987:135). See also RSV, NIV, NEB and REB.

<sup>9</sup>See NEB; REB; Barton (1912:153); and Crenshaw (1988:153).

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Ehrlich, quoted in Gordis (1968:295).

<sup>11</sup>E.g., RSV; NIV; Gordis (1968:295).

<sup>12</sup>E.g., Whitley (1979:75,76).

The grounds for this reading are that **כֵּן-עָשׂוּ** could be read 'act rightly' as well as 'act thus'. Although this is not the most common usage of **כֵּן**, it does occur quite often in the Hebrew Bible as an adjective meaning 'right, veritable, honest'<sup>13</sup>, and would provide a contrast to the expressions **מַעֲשֵׂה הָרָעָה** and **לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע** in v.11, and **עָשָׂה רָע** in v.12. The fact that the reader is likely to understand the third person plural verbs as referring to **רָשָׁעִים** because **כֵּן-עָשׂוּ** is held back to the last possible moment is not a sufficient argument against this reading, because the author has used before the technique of changing the meaning of a verse by an unexpected final word. Indeed, if this reading is correct, causing the reader to totally adjust his/her understanding of the verse by placing **כֵּן-עָשׂוּ** at the end, great emphasis is placed on this expression. Nor does the fact that **כֵּן** seems not to be used in this way elsewhere in Qohelet rule out this translation here: the author often uses words in unexpected and unusual ways.

One strong argument in favour of this reading is that it does not require any emendation of the text, but only that we read against the MT accentuation. This, again, is not without precedent in Qohelet. However, it still faces the difficulty of the separation of **וַיָּבֹאוּ** and **יִהְיוּ**, and the fact that they are different forms of the verb.

One final possibility is to follow the MT accentuation so that the section from **רָשָׁעִים** to **יִהְיוּ** all refers to the wicked, and read only from **וַיָּשָׁתְכֻהוּ** to **כֵּן-עָשׂוּ** as referring to those who act rightly<sup>14</sup>:

And thus I saw the wicked being buried, and they came and went from the holy place; but those who act rightly are forgotten in the city.

While this reading adheres most closely to the MT, it would be unwise to place too much stock by it, because there are too many uncertainties in the verse. Perhaps again the author intentionally wrote a verse which could be understood in different ways.

There are three different words from the root **עָשָׂה** in v.11<sup>15</sup>: **נַעֲשֶׂה**, **מַעֲשֵׂה** and **לַעֲשׂוֹת**. Indeed, if **עָשׂוּ** in v.10 and **עָשָׂה** in v.12 are considered as well, there are five different words from the root in these three verses, which illustrates the comprehensiveness of this study of the deeds that are done under the sun. Moreover, there are three expressions used to convey the

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Exod 10:29; Num 27:7; Judg 12:6; 2 Kgs 17:9; Ps 65:10; etc. Cf Schoors (1992:90-1).

<sup>14</sup>See Fox (1989:249).

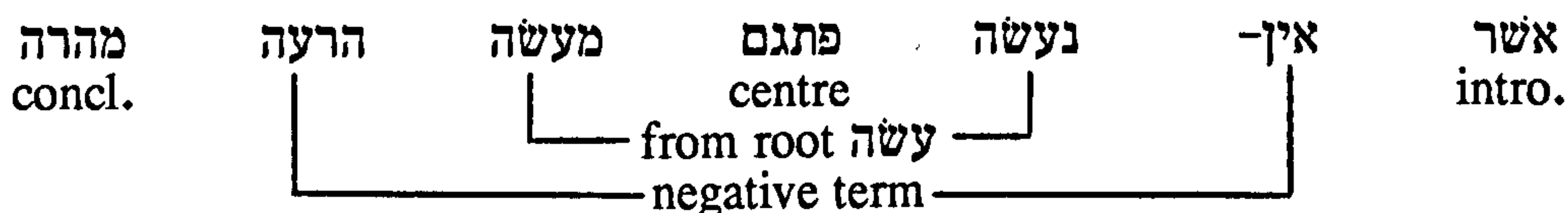
<sup>15</sup>Schoors (1992:96) notes,

In 8,11 **אֵין-נַעֲשֶׂה** can only be a niph. participle because **אֵין** is the negative particle in a nominal clause; hence read **נַעֲשֶׂה**. This wrong vocalization raises the question whether some of the many **נַעֲשֶׂה** forms do not hide a participle.



performance of evil deeds: *מעשה הרעה* and *לעשות רע* in v.11, and *עשה רע* in v.12. If *בן-עשו* in v.10 relates back to *רשעים*, this gives a fourth - although it might indicate exactly the opposite - and *כמעשה הרשעים* in v.14 may be synonymous. It should also be noted that *בן* is used in three different ways in vv.10,11: *בן-עשו* (v.10), and *על-בן* (v.11). The fact that it is only used four times elsewhere in Qohelet (*על-בן* occurs in 5:1; cf 3:19; 5:15 and 7:6), lends support to the contention that the author is playing on the meaning of the word in the expression *בן-עשו* in v.10.

The first half of v.11 reads awkwardly because *מהרה* is separated from both the verb and the subject of the verb. However, this serves to place particular emphasis upon the word, which occurs at the end of the clause. It also emphasises *פתגם*, which is the middle word with a word from the root *עשה* either side, and a negative term either side of that again. This gives a chiasmic structure to the clause:



Although the two halves of the verse contain different numbers of words (seven and nine), they both contain 26 letters. This may indicate that the second half of the verse is a carefully balanced response to the first half:

*because* sentence is not speedily carried out against an evil deed,  
*therefore* human hearts are fully set to do evil.

Alternatively, depending on how *אשר* is read, the second half of the verse could be a response to something described as *hebel*:

This also is *hebel*,  
*that* sentence is not speedily carried out against an evil deed,  
 therefore human hearts are fully set to do evil.

*אשר* occurs in much greater concentration in 8:9-9:10 than anywhere else in Qohelet. It is used 29 times in these 19 verses (8:9,9,10,11,12,12,12,13,14,14,14,15,15,16,16,17,17; 9:1, 2,2,2,3,4,6,9,9,9,10,10) out of a total of 89 in the book. 11 of these are in the 6 verses 8:9-14, and several are ambiguous<sup>16</sup>.

There is some disagreement about the implications of v.11. Barton (1912:153) ascribes it to the *Chasid* glossator who states that 'men are governed by childish evasions of penalty.'

<sup>16</sup>Cf Schoors on the use of *אשר/שי* (1992:138-149).

Whybray (1989a:136-7) notes the ambiguity about who is responsible for carrying out sentence, 'it is not clear whether the sentencing authority referred to is human or divine.' He goes on to observe, 'it has been argued that this is an implicit criticism of God for allowing evil to proliferate,' concluding that 'such criticism would be uncharacteristic of Qohelet.' By contrast, Crenshaw (1988:155) sees the blame being shifted from people who commit evil deeds to governing authorities, *and* to God:

This blanket statement about human perversity shifts responsibility away from sinners to those entrusted with punishing them. People are guilty of evil, but God must take some blame, since a breakdown has occurred in the scheme of reward and punishment.

The verse could either be read as a condemnation of people who take every opportunity to commit evil deeds, or a criticism of those who ought to be punishing them - be it God or the civil authorities or both.

V.12, like v.11, begins with the word *אשר*, which could mean either 'that', indicating that it is a further illustration of what the author described in v.10 as *גם-זה הבל*, or it could mean 'because, for'. In the latter case it either offers a reason for the preceding statement, or points forward to the second half of the verse, or possibly both. *אשר* is used three times in this verse, possibly in three different ways. The second occurrence follows the verb *יודע* and should be rendered 'that', 'I know *that*'. The third occurrence could either be rendered 'because' or 'who': 'it will be well with the God-fearers *because* they fear him'; or 'it will be well with the God-fearers *who* fear him.'

*מאת* appears to be construct in form, in which case either there is an ellipsis presupposing something like *פעמים* (see, for example, the phrase *אלף שנים פעמים* in 6:6), or some such word has dropped out of the text. An alternative which Gordis suggests (1968:297), is to view it as an archaic absolute modifying *רע*. The sense is much the same in either case. Fox (1989:252), however, argues that 'MT's *m<sup>e</sup>'at* ... is awkward, if not impossible'. He recommends instead that, based on *απο τωτε* in LXX, we make a minor emendation to *m<sup>e</sup>'az* which, he suggests, 'is precisely what is required by the context, to emphasize that punishment is delayed.'

*ומאריך לו* may also be elliptical, or have had a word drop out. If this is the case, we may have here a participial form of the expression which is used in the next verse, *יאריך ימים*. This would create a tension between v.12a and v.13a:



אשר חטא עשה רע מאת ו- מאריך [ימים] לו v.12a  
 וטוב לא-יהיה לרשע ולא-יארִיךְ ימים כצל v.13a

However, it is also possible that it is עשה רע which is prolonged - to him. We might compare לו לרע in v.9, recalling the ambiguity there, and also the clause ויש רשע מאריך ברעתו in 7:15 where the expression מאריך ברעתו may indicate an unpleasant future for the wicked person. Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional.

The phrase ולא-יארִיךְ ימים כצל in v.13 is emphasised because it disrupts the careful balance of v.12b and v.13:

יִירָאוּ מִלִּפְנֵי   מִלִּפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים	אֲשֶׁר   אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ	וְלֹא-יֵאָרִיךְ יָמִים כְּצֵל	יִהְיֶה-טוֹב לִירְאֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְטוֹב לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְרָשָׁע	v.12b  v.13
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It could be understood in different ways. Reading with the accents in the MT, it might be rendered either 'he will not lengthen his days which are like a shadow,' or 'he will not lengthen like a shadow his days.' In the former case the image seems to be that the life of the wicked person passes quickly as shadows do. In the latter case it would be the lengthening of shadows as the sun sets which is intended. Both amount to much the same thing - life will not be prolonged. However, some commentators ignore the *athnah* in the MT and connect כצל to the final clause, 'like a shadow are they who do not fear God.' Again the meaning of the verse is the same.

Apart from this phrase, v.12b and v.13 are carefully balanced so that the לא and אֵינְנוּ in v.13 are stressed:

יִירָאוּ מִלִּפְנֵי   מִלִּפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים	אֲשֶׁר   אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ	לִירְאֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְטוֹב לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְרָשָׁע	יִהְיֶה-טוֹב וְטוֹב לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְרָשָׁע	v.12b  v.13
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The whole meaning of the verses turns on these two negatives: in the first it is stated that 'it will go well' with the God-fearers precisely because 'they fear him', while in the second it is asserted that 'it will *not* go well' with the wicked for the express reason that 'they do *not* fear God'. It should also be noted that הָאֱלֹהִים is central in v.12b, but in v.13 it is left to the end of the verse, and the definite article is omitted.

Crenshaw (1988:155) finds great difficulty in accepting that 8:12,13 express the views of the author of the rest of Qohelet<sup>17</sup>:

<sup>17</sup>Cf Barton (1912:153-4).

The second half of the verse presents a view that Qohelet does not otherwise endorse, in language normally used for his own insights. The *ki gam-yodea' 'ani* (yet I know) introduces a subordinate clause that extends to verse 14. Either this affirmation of traditional belief about the fate of sinners and good people is a secondary gloss or it constitutes a concession to tradition that Qohelet boldly undercuts in verse 14. In this instance, the verdict 'gloss' seems justified.

Certainly there is some tension between these verses and those which come before them, and especially with the next verse. A number of scholars<sup>18</sup> take an approach similar to that adopted by Loader (1986:101) when he argues,

when the author says in verse 12b, "yet I know," he uses a different form of the Hebrew verb from that used when he offers his own opinion. What he is doing is this: he cites the anticipated answer to the first part of his argument in advance in order to torpedo it in the last part ... And really not much is left of these pious-sounding words when the Preacher sets them up in opposition to his solid supply of life observations.

But, as Fox (1989:252-3) points out, there is nothing that clearly marks these words out as the opinion of anyone other than the author him- or herself. Fox's own view<sup>19</sup> is that Qohelet simply presents the contradictions in all their shocking reality. Ogden's conclusion (1987:137-8) is more positive, but some similarity can be seen when he states,

we conclude that Qoheleth basically supports the traditional view about divine justice, but this does not mean that he cannot also bring before it some serious questions which must be faced.

However, his assertion regarding v.14 that 'Qoheleth stands in stout defence of the traditional view, that evil will be judged', moves him some distance from Fox's view. Even farther from Fox's view, and those expressed by Loader and Crenshaw, is the position adopted by Eaton (1983:122)<sup>20</sup>:

The Preacher is content to wait patiently. The sinner's evil may be great ... and his life prolonged (*lengthen his life*), but he holds it as a matter of faith that the vindication of the righteous is only a question of time. The way of safety is to *fear God*. [His emphasis]

V.14 contains two statements that are even more carefully balanced than v.12b and v.13, and which appear to contradict the sentiments of those verses<sup>21</sup>:

~~יש צדיקים אשר מגיע אלהם כמעשה הרשעים~~  
~~יש רשעים ש- מגיע אלהם כמעשה הצדיקים~~

The verse also contains an introduction and conclusion both of which use the word *הבל*, so that, in Crenshaw's words (1988:156), 'The idea of *hebel* encloses the entire verse.' It forms an *inclusio* in a similar way that the phrase *הכל הבל* does for the book as a whole:

<sup>18</sup>E.g., Davidson (1986:60); Gordis (1968:297); Murphy (1992:85); Schoors (1992:135); Scott (1965:243).

<sup>19</sup>Bergant (1982:273-4) expresses a similar view.

<sup>20</sup>Cf Farmer (1991:181-2); Fredericks (1993:88-9); Kidner (1976:77); Zlotowitz (1988:153-5).

<sup>21</sup>Note the pointing of *מַעֲשֵׂה*. The same word occurs in 5:5; 7:13; 11:5, and in all these cases all or some of the versions have the plural, reflecting *מַעֲשֵׂי*. Cf Schoors (1992:22-4).



יש-הבל אשר נעשה על-הארץ אשר  
 יש צדיקים אשר מגיע אלהם כמעשה הרשעים  
 יש רשעים ש- מגיע אלהם כמעשה הצדיקים  
 אמרתי שגם-זה הבל

The perfect balance between the two statements is upset by the use in the second statement of the shortened form  $\text{ש-}$  rather than  $\text{אשר}$  as in the first. There seems to be no good reason for the change, and this is the first of only two occurrences of  $\text{ש-}$  in the section, compared to the use of  $\text{אשר}$  eleven times, and there is a return to  $\text{אשר}$  twice in each of vv.15,16 and 17. It may be that the three occurrences of  $\text{אשר}$  in the verse should all be rendered differently: 'which', 'that' and 'who'. There is then a change to  $\text{ש-}$ , and it should probably be rendered 'who' on the first occasion and 'that' on the second. This further illustrates the author's propensity for using the same word to convey different things, and different words to convey the same thing. The use of  $\text{על-הארץ}$  in place of  $\text{תחת השמש}$  may provide a further illustration of the latter.

The sentiments in 3:16,  $\text{ועור ראיתי תחת השמש מקום המשפט שמה הרשע ומקום הצדק שמה הרשע}$  are highly pertinent to 8:14. Of particular note is the juxtaposition of 3:16 with the affirmation in v.17,  $\text{אמרתי אני בלבי את-הצדיק ואת-הרשע ישפט האלהים}$ , which corresponds to the juxtaposition of 8:12b-13 and v.14. We noted above that there is a chiasmus in 3:16-17 which moves from justice denied 'under the sun', through 'wickedness' at the centre, to justice restored by God: a similar chiasmus appears in 8:14, where there are two occurrences of  $\text{רשעים}$  at the centre, but this time it moves from  $\text{הבל}$  'on earth' back to  $\text{הבל}$ :

הבל	צדיקים	מעשה	רשעים	רשעים	מעשה	צדיקים	הבל

There may be considerable irony in this verse if it does relate back to 3:16-17.

Just as the commentators respond differently to 8:12b-13, so they present various explanations of the purpose served by v.14. For example, Crenshaw (1988:156) argues that 'Qohelet strikes down the traditional belief of 8:12b-13 with a crushing blow'<sup>22</sup>; Whybray (1989a:137) contends that this verse records 'inexplicable exceptions and no more'<sup>23</sup>; and

<sup>22</sup>Cf Bergant (1982:274); Davidson (1986:60); Gordis (1968:297); Loader (1986:101-2); Murphy (1992:85).

<sup>23</sup>Cf Ogden (1987:138-9).

Fredericks (1993:89) asserts that 'it is only a *temporary* situation that justice is not apparent' [his emphasis], and that 'Qoheleth is consoled by the fact that "everything is temporary"'<sup>24</sup>. In fact, the apparently traditional theology presented in vv.12b-13 and the observations in v.14 are simply juxtaposed, leaving a gap for the reader to fill as (s)he tries to work out for her- or himself what is the connection between them. Because of the uncertainties in vv.10-12a, these are of little help in deciding how to interpret this passage as a whole. It is plain that when one studies the evil deeds that people commit, there are inequities such as people lording it over others to their harm; wicked people receiving proper burial while those who act rightly are forgotten; punishment for evil deeds being delayed; sinners prolonging their lives; and the wicked receiving what is due to the righteous. Nonetheless, the author still affirms that it will go well with the righteous, and will not go well with the wicked.

#### 14.1.2 8:15-17

V.15 is one of the verses issuing the 'call to enjoyment'. In some respects it seems decidedly out of place in this context. There is no word here from the root עָשָׂה, nor does it seem to tie in with the 'evil deeds' of the preceding verses, or 'not finding out' in the following verses. Not since 5:17 has a similar verse occurred, and not since 7:25 has there been a similar use of אָנִי, nor does one occur again until 9:16 which is the last in Qohelet (but 8:9 is half way between 7:25 and 9:16). Its positive tone grates with the verses either side, and while vv.16,17 might follow on logically from v.14, it is difficult to see any connection between the themes of v.15 and v.16. All these factors serve to draw particular attention to the verse, perhaps even calling into question its seemingly positive tone.

Two new features appear in 8:15. The first is the author's statement that he *lauds* 'pleasure'. There are two roots שָׁבַח<sup>25</sup>, and this root is used only six times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>26</sup>. There is considerable irony in the fact that it is always used elsewhere in connection with God. Its occurrence in Qoh 4:2 is also very different because there Qohelet lauds the dead: וְשָׁבַח אֲנִי אֶת-הַמֵּתִים שֶׁכָּבַר מֵתוֹ מִן-הַחַיִּים אֲשֶׁר הֵמָּה חַיִּים עַדְנָה.

<sup>24</sup>Cf Farmer (1991:182).

<sup>25</sup>The other means 'still', and is used only three times in the Hebrew Bible: Pss 65:8; 89:10; Prov 29:11.

<sup>26</sup>Pss 63:4; 106:47; 117:1; 145:4; 147:12; 1 Chr 16:35.



The second new feature is the use of the verb לֹוה, which occurs only here in Qohelet, and in the qal only here in the Hebrew Bible. There are three roots לֹוה, and the author may be playing on its different meanings. כֹּאשֶׁר is also used in two different ways in v.15. כֹּאשֶׁר, at the beginning of v.16, introduces a third use of אֲשֶׁר in these two verses. It also means that v.16 starts in a similar way to the last clause in v.15, only it is the author who is the giver this time rather than God:

אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים  
כֹּאשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת-לִבִּי

This recalls 1:13 which is the only other verse to use the exact phrase נָתַתִּי אֶת-לִבִּי, and which also compares this with what God gives. Indeed, there are a number of similarities between the two verses which suggest that 8:16 is designed to recall 1:13,

עַל כֹּל- אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ	בְּחִכְמָה	וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-לִבִּי לְדִרוֹשׁ וּלְתוֹר	1:13
אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה עַל-הָאָרֶץ	חִכְמָה וּלְרֹאוֹת אֶת-הָעֵינַן	כֹּאשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת-לִבִּי לְדַעַת	8:16

It also bears a resemblance to 1:17 and 7:25,

חִכְמָה	לִבִּי לְדַעַת	וְאֵתָנָה	1:17
חִכְמָה	וּלִבִּי לְדַעַת וּלְתוֹר וּבִקֵּשׁ	סְבוֹתֵי אֲנִי	7:25
חִכְמָה	לִבִּי לְדַעַת	כֹּאשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת-	8:16

And the two verses 8:16,17 are similar in both vocabulary and sentiment to 3:10,11:

הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ	רָאִיתִי אֶת-הָעֵינַן אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבָנִי	3:10
עַל-הָאָרֶץ	וּלְרֹאוֹת אֶת-הָעֵינַן אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה	8:16
אֶת-הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר- עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים	לֹא-יִמְצָא הָאָדָם	3:11
אֶת-הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה	לֹא יוּכַל הָאָדָם לְמַצּוֹא	8:17

The expression אֶת-הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים in 8:17 is also similar to אֶת-כָּל-מַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים in 3:11 and כָּל-אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים in 3:14, as well as אֶת-מַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים in 7:13 and 11:5. Precisely the same words occur elsewhere only in 12:14, but there the deeds are not performed by God:

אֶת-כָּל-מַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים	וְרָאִיתִי	8:17
אֶת-כָּל-מַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים יֵבֵא בַּמִּשְׁפָּט		12:14

8:16 contributes to the unity of the section from 8:9-9:10 because it recalls 8:9 and anticipates 9:1,

8:9 ראיני ונתון את-לבי לכל-מעשה אשר נעשה  
 8:16 כאשר נתתי את-לבי לדעת חכמה ולראות את-הענין אשר נעשה על-הארץ

8:16 כאשר נתתי את-לבי לדעת חכמה  
 9:1 כי את-כל-זה נתתי אל-לבי

Of course 8:9 and 9:1 also bear similarities to each other,

8:9 את-כל-זה ראיני ונתון את-לבי  
 9:1 את-כל-זה נתתי אל-לבי

The second part of 8:16 recalls the end of 5:11,

5:11 איננו מניח לו לישון

8:16 גם ביום ובלילה שנה בעיניו איננו ראה

2:23, כל-ימיו מכאבים וכעס ענינו גם-בלילה לא-שכב לבו, displays similar sentiments.

It is the second half of 8:16 which is the most difficult. The verse seems to be the protasis of which v.17 is the apodosis, but the second part of the verse appears to interrupt this sequence. The main problem with this clause is the use of third person pronominal suffixes, when the first half of the verse is in the first person. There seem to be three ways to tackle this problem. Either we regard the third person reference in the sense of the English 'one', 'one does not see sleep'; or it refers forward to האדם in the next verse, which serves much the same purpose as the previous alternative; or we follow Fox (1989:255), who emends to the first person, because 'the *waw-yodh* confusion this emendation presupposes is less unlikely than the unmotivated switch to the third person.' However, we might recall that 4:8 changes without warning from third person in the first half to first person in the second.

V.17 in the MT seems to fall into four parts, an introduction and three clauses containing the expression לא [יוכל ל-] מצא:

וראיני את-כל-מעשה האלהים  
 כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת-השמש  
 בשל אשר יעמל האדם לבקש ולא ימצא  
 וגם אם-יאמר החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא

The fact that the first occurrence of לא [יוכל ל-] מצא occurs between את-כל-מעשה האלהים and את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת-השמש allows for ambiguity over which it relates to. The verse would make perfectly good sense if either of these two phrases were omitted, but the two sit awkwardly together. The reader may initially take לא מצא as the conclusion of the first part of the verse which would give three statements that all use a different form of לא מצא, but leaves את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש in the air:



וראיתי את-כל-מעשה האלהים כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא  
את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת-השמש  
בשל אשר יעמל האדם לבקש ולא ימצא  
וגם אם-יאמר החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא

Alternatively, לא מצא may be read as the start of the second clause in the verse, but this would leave the opening clause in the air:

וראיתי את-כל-מעשה האלהים  
כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת-השמש  
בשל אשר יעמל האדם לבקש ולא ימצא  
וגם אם-יאמר החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא

Perhaps it is intended to relate both ways so that some connection is established between the deeds of God and the deeds which are done under the sun. However, it is not clear what this connection is, and this may be an intentional aspect of the ambiguity of the verse: how do God's deeds relate to what is done under the sun? Perhaps this is part of what people are unable to find out. We suggested above that the first line may also form the conclusion to v.16.

On a number of occasions in Qohelet it is unclear whether the actions under consideration are to be ascribed to human or divine agency. This is particularly so for the passive נעשה, as in 8:11, אין-נעשה פתגם מעשה הרעה מהרה על-כן מלא לב בני-האדם בהם לעשות רע, where it is unclear who is responsible for this state of affairs. Indeed, of twelve occurrences of נעשה (1:9,13,14; 2:17; 4:3; 8:9,11,14,16,17; 9:3,6), none states clearly who is responsible for what 'is done'. All of these, except 8:11, refer to what is done 'under the sun' or 'under heaven' or 'on earth', and one might have assumed to this point that this indicates human actions. But 8:17 casts doubt on the validity of this assumption. In 1:13 a hint was given that this could be the case, because the reference there to כל-אשר נעשה תחת השמים is directly followed by הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו. In other instances (4:3; 8:9), however, the context does specifically concerns human deeds. It is also frequently unclear whose deeds נעשה refers to. 5 of the 21 occurrences of this word specifically refer to God's deeds (3:11; 7:13; 8:17,17; 11:5), and one refers to deeds done by people but with God's approval (9:7). Only 10 refer specifically to deeds done by human beings (2:4,11; 3:22; 4:4; 5:5; 8:14,14; 9:7,10; 12:14). In the remaining verses it cannot be stated with certainty to whose actions נעשה refers (1:14; 2:17; 4:3; 8:9,11). However, in 8:17 it may be that the author is attributing נעשה תחת השמש to God.

## 14.1.6 9:1-6

As we observed above, the opening to 8:9,16 and 9:1 are similar, but, typical of Qohelet, all slightly different:

ונתון את-לבי	את-כל-זה ראיתי	8:9
כאשר נתתי את-לבי		8:16
נתתי אל-לבי	את-כל-זה	9:1

We noted that את-כל-זה is used only in 8:9 and 9:1, but reference is made to 'giving one's heart' seven times, no two exactly the same<sup>27</sup>:

ונתתי	את לבי ל-	1:13
ואתנה	לבי ל-	1:17
יתן	אל-לבו	7:2
אל-תתן	לבך	7:21
ונתון	את-לבי ל-	8:9
נתתי	את-לבי ל-	8:16
נתתי	אל-לבי	9:1

Only elsewhere in 7:2 is the preposition אל- used, but there seems to be no differences in meaning and, in fact, a number of manuscripts read את-.

The same problem occurs in 9:1 as in 8:9 in discerning whether the start of the verse refers back to the preceding verses, or forward to the verses which come after. It may be that the first את-כל-זה refers back, linking in with the same expression in 8:9, while the second points forward. In this way, the opening clauses of 9:1 would serve to link 8:9-17 with 9:1-10. The repetition of this expression may also highlight the middle word, כל, which occurs in greater concentration here (vv.1,1,1,2,2,3,3,4,6,8,9,9,10) than anywhere else in Qohelet.

אשר continues to be used regularly in this passage, and again is used in different ways. It may be that אשר is used in three different ways in vv.1,3(+6),4; כאשר seems to be used in two different ways in v.2; ולאשר occurs in v.2; and we find the short form, -ש only in v.5.

The first difficulty in 9:1 concerns the word לבור. It is pointed as an *ayin waw* verb בור, but such a verb does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Some commentators regard it as a form of the double *ayin* verb ברר, 'purify, select'<sup>28</sup>, which is only used elsewhere in Qohelet in 3:18 (which is precisely the same distance from the centre of the book), where its translation is also highly problematical. Gordis (1968:299) cites Ges<sup>K</sup> 113, 4a, and gives examples of other similar forms of geminate verbs in Gen 49:19 (יגד from גדר) and Prov

<sup>27</sup>Ogden (1982:159) regards נתתי את לבי לי in 1:13 and 8:16 as an *inclusio* to 1:13-8:17, a new section starting in 9:1. 9:1, he asserts, 'is *without doubt* an introductory expression.' [Our emphasis]

<sup>28</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:159), Gordis (1968:299).



29:6 (רִנָּן from יִרְוֶן) in support of this argument. Other commentators follow the LXX, which renders this part of the verse, *καὶ καρδία μου συν παν εἶδον τουτο*, and propose emending the text from *ולבור את-כל-זה* to *ולבי ראה את-כל-זה*<sup>29</sup>. However, Crenshaw (1988:159) points out that, 'although this reading seems preferable to the Massoretic Text, the principle of *lectio difficilior* favours the rare *w<sup>e</sup>la-bur*.' It should probably be read here as an infinitive verb continuing the thought of the preceding finite verb, the first person singular perfect verb *גַּתִּי*. We might tentatively suggest that its meaning here, which presumably is similar to 3:18, is something like 'test'. This might indicate that the author intends to test the following statement that, 'the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.'

*עֲבַד*, in the sense of 'work', is not only unique to this verse in Qohelet, where this important concept is conveyed by the frequent use of the root *עָמַל*, but the Aramaic form of the word *עֲבַדִּיהֶם* is not used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. There seems to be no good reason why the author would have selected this unusual word over the keyword *עָמַל* or *עָשָׂה* or perhaps *עָנִי*. On this basis Fox (1988:256) goes so far as to say that 'this is one of the points where the theory of an Aramaic origin is most persuasive.' However, it provides a further example of the use of different words to convey the same thing.

It is not explicitly stated whose love and hate it is that is referred to in 9:1 by the phrase *גַּם-אֱהָבָה גַּם-שִׂנְאָה אֵין יוֹדַע הָאָדָם*. Most commentators ascribe them to *הָאֱלֹהִים*, which seems to make good sense in the context of this verse, but they could also refer to *הָאָדָם*. Alternatively, it may refer to love and hate in general, or else the expression could be a merismus indicating the whole spectrum of emotions from love at one end to hate at the other. This seems to be the case in the poem in 3:2-8, and, indeed, the two words *אֱהָבָה* and *שִׂנְאָה* occur together only in 3:8 and 9:1. The near-identical phrase in v.6, *גַּם אֱהָבָתָם גַּם-שִׂנְאָתָם*, seems to refer to human passions. There *גַּם-קִנְיָתָם* is added to the list. Usually this part of v.1 is read, 'whether it is love or hate man does not know'<sup>30</sup>, but *גַּם ... גַּם* plus a negative usually means 'neither ... nor'<sup>31</sup>: hence the clause should be rendered, 'a person knows neither love nor hate'. This is in line also with the positive use of *גַּם ... גַּם ... גַּם* in v.6.

<sup>29</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:256); Whitley (1979:78).

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., RSV; NEB; REB; NIV; Crenshaw (1988:158); Gordis (1968:299). But see also the translations in Barton (1912:157); Fox (1989:253).

<sup>31</sup>See, e.g., Gen 43:8; Exod 4:10; Num 23:25; 1 Sam 20:27; 28:6; 1 Kgs 3:26.

The final phrase in 9:1, **הכל לפנייהם**, may be read either temporally or spatially. Some commentators regard this phrase as meaningless<sup>32</sup> and follow LXX in reading the first word of v.2 as **הכל** rather than **הכלל**, and attach it to the end of our verse as is suggested in BHS and represented in Pesh. This is the reading followed by RSV, while NEB and REB translate as though the word **הכלל** had dropped from the original text where it would have followed the **הכל** with which v.2 starts. However, MT is grammatically sound, and while the precise intent of the phrases with which v.1 closes and v.2 opens is not clear, sense can be made of them. Considering the difficulty and ambiguity of the language in Qohelet, it seems wiser to follow MT here.

**הכל** could be translated either 'both', referring back to **שנאה** and **אהבה**, or 'everything' as seems to be the case in the v.2 - though this is an insufficient reason for assuming it should be rendered in the same way here. The plural suffix on **לפניהם** might pick up on **האדם** if it represents people in general, though **האדם** ought to be represented by a singular suffix. Alternatively, it could refer to **שנאה** and **אהבה**, or to the righteous and the wise. But however these words are understood it is difficult to see how the verse hangs together, and it may well be that the verse division in the MT serves to further confuse the sense of 9:1-2.

Gordis (1968:300) argues persuasively that the opening words of v.2, **הכל כאשר לכל**, may be an idiom with the meaning 'everything is like everything else', which serves as a prelude to the remainder of the verse where opposites are used to illustrate that everyone meets with the same fate - presumably death. He bases this largely on the similarity between this phrase and the phrase **אשר אהיה** in Exod 3:14, and **נא ביד תשלח** in Exod 4:13. A number of commentators agree with this argument<sup>33</sup>, but others<sup>34</sup> emend the text in line with LXX and/or Pesh., and view **כאשר** as the beginning of v.2. However, while the latter seems to give a more straightforward reading (perhaps a sufficient argument against it in Qohelet!), the former avoids emendation by making reasonable sense of the text as it stands, and maintains the ambiguous and complicated use of language we have come to expect in Qohelet. One argument against it is the absence of a *zaqeph* over **לכל**, but the accentuation in this book is insufficient on its own as a basis for emending the text.

<sup>32</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:257). Cf Loader (1986:107).

<sup>33</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:159,160); Eaton (1983:125); Ogden (1987:145); Whybray (1989:141).

<sup>34</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:157-159); Davidson (1986:67-68); Fox (1989:256-257); Loader (1986:107).



There follows a list of opposites which presumably represent all the people who lie between the extremes mentioned. **לְטוֹב** appears to be out of place in this list, firstly because it is not paired with its opposite as are all the other elements in the list, and secondly because **כְּטוֹב** appears later in the list with **כַּחֲטָא**. This is explained in different ways. Gordis (1968:300) suggests that **לְטוֹב** ought to be combined with the next word so that **לְטוֹב וּלְטָהוֹר** is opposed to **וּלְמָטָא** - the first element being longer than the second to balance the next pair where the second element, **לֹאֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ זֹבַח**, is longer than the first, **וּלְזֹבַח**. Fox (1989:257) proposes that we should add **וּלְרָע** to provide a pair for **לְטוֹב**. However, both these solutions ignore the fact that **טוֹב** appears later in the list with a pair, and there seems no good reason either for repeating it, or for providing it with a different pair to the one later in the verse. Therefore, we may conclude either that **לְטוֹב** is an error and should be removed, or that the author deliberately disrupts the list by adding an element which is out of place. Considering the plays on the word **טוֹב** earlier in the book, the latter is a distinct possibility.

**זֶה** at the beginning of v.3 may pick up on its use twice at the beginning of v.1, perhaps the second of these in particular. If the phrase **לְבוֹר אֶת-כָּל-זֶה** points forward to the second part of v.1, **זֶה** in v.3 may announce the conclusion the author reaches in light of v.2. The reversal of **לְכָל מִקְרָה אֶחָד** in v.2 to **מִקְרָה אֶחָד לְכָל** in v.3 may serve to conclude this half of the passage. It also means that this half of the passage closes with the word **לְכָל**, which emphasises the fact that one fate comes to *all*. In fact, the highest concentrations of the word **כָּל** are in 2:10-19; 3:9-21 and 9:1-10 - the very passages which refer to **מִקְוֶה אֶחָד**.

The phrase at the centre of 9:1-6, **לֵב בְּנֵי-הָאָדָם מְלֵא-רָע**, recalls the similar phrase in 8:11, **מֵלֵא לֵב בְּנֵי הָאָדָם בְּהֵם לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע**. However, 9:3 adds **וְהוֹלִלּוּת בְּלִבָּבָם בַּחֲיֵיהֶם**. 8:11 is set in a passage which focuses on 'evil deeds', and is likely to be interpreted accordingly. However, neither phrase in 9:3 need necessarily bear a moral sense, and indeed this is an unlikely interpretation of **וְהוֹלִלּוּת בְּלִבָּבָם בַּחֲיֵיהֶם**. It may be that what is meant in 9:3 is that human hearts or minds are full of tragedy, or something similar, and it is this which drives them to madness - like oppression is said in 7:7 to drive the wise person mad. **רָע** at the beginning of 9:3 may be read in the same way, 'it is a *tragedy* in all that is done under the sun that all meet one fate', and it could be this that drives people mad. This adds an ironic twist to 8:11.

The key concepts in the second half of 9:1-6 are 'life' and 'death', presumably making explicit what has been referred to so far as *מקרה אחד*. Over a quarter of all the words from the root *מות* are in these three verses; and the four words from the root *חיה* in these verses plus the three in v.9 make up more than a quarter of the words from this root as well. Perhaps surprisingly, only in these verses and 4:2 do the two roots occur together, and there seems to be at least a tension, if not a contradiction between the sentiments of 9:4,5 and 4:2, where the author says, *ושבח אני את-המתים שכבר מתו מן-החיים אשר המה חיים עדנה*. It is perhaps also surprising in a book where death seems to be an important underlying theme, that the actual root *מות* occurs only fifteen times (2:16; 3:2,19,19; 4:2,2; 7:1,17,26; 8:8; 9:3,4,5,5; 10:1) and that it is not explicitly discussed in great depth. In 7:26 and 10:1 'death' is used simply as part of a metaphor: in 7:26 a woman is said to be 'more bitter than death', and in 10:1 'dead flies' which pollute ointment are likened to a little folly polluting wisdom. Four times it is the time of death which is under consideration: 3:2 states that there is a time for death just as there is for birth, while 7:1 affirms that the time of death is actually better than the time of birth; 7:17 asks why one should die before his/her time, and 8:8 states that one does not have any power over the day of death. Of the remaining nine references to death, seven are in the passages we mentioned above in which *מקרה אחד* is mentioned, where they serve to specify precisely what that one fate is. The remaining two references are in 4:2, which we also noted above<sup>35</sup>.

The word *בחר* in the *ketibh* in v.4, is given as *יחבר* in the *qere*<sup>36</sup>. There are good grounds here for reading with the *qere* as most commentators do<sup>37</sup>. Firstly, *יחבר* is widely attested in ancient Hebrew manuscripts as well as in LXX, Pesh., Vulg. and Targ. Secondly, the pual of *בחר* is not attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, while the pual of *חבר* is found in Exod 28:7; 39:4 and Ps 94:20; 122:3. Thirdly, the preposition normally used with *בחר* is *ל*-, and sometimes *מן*- or *ב*-, but *חבר* is followed on a number of occasions by *אל*- (e.g., Gen 14:3; Exod 26:3,3; Ezek 1:9). However, none of these is conclusive, and Ogden (1987:147)

<sup>35</sup>Nonetheless, 'death' is clearly a major theme in Qohelet. Some reference to it seems to be made in 1:4(?),11(?); 2:14-17,18-21; 3:2,18-21,22(?); 4:2-3,16; 5:14-15; 6:2,4-6,7-9(?),10-12(?), 7:1-4,8,14,16-17; 8:7,8,10,13; 9:1-6,10,11-12; 10:8-10,14; 11:8-12:7. Fox (1988:67) is representative of many commentators when he asserts 'Throughout the book, Qohelet reveals an obsession with death unparalleled in biblical literature.'

<sup>36</sup>Schoors (1992:40) asserts that, 'except for Qoh 5,10 and, in a lesser degree, 10,20, the Q readings are preferable. However, only in Qoh 9,4 and 12,6 does the variant K-Q affect the meaning of the text.'

<sup>37</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:161); Fox (1989:253); Gordis (1968:304); Whybray (1989:142).



maintains that 'the emendation does nothing to clarify the meaning of the verb.' Moreover, Crenshaw (1988:161) argues,

On this reading, those who are still alive have confidence; however, Qohelet has earlier praised the dead over the living. This secondary Qere reading removes the sting of Qohelet's denial of reward and punishment in 9:3. The original Ketib is ironic.

The second half of v.4 takes the form of a 'better than' proverb typical of Qohelet. However, there are some features of the proverb which deserve note. Were it a direct comparison between a living dog and a dead lion it could have been more succinctly and poetically expressed in the balance form used elsewhere in Qohelet thus: טוב כלב חי מן-האריה המת. This may be the meaning of the proverb anyway, but it is complicated by the appearance in the first half of the preposition ל and the pronoun הוּא, which do not occur in the second half. It may be, as most commentators suppose<sup>38</sup>, that they are simply used for emphasis, 'for *indeed* a living dog (yes even *it!*) is better than a dead lion.' Alternatively, the sense of the preposition from the first half may carry over into the second half thus: 'for it is better for a living dog than (for) a dead lion.' Another problem in the proverb is the use of the article with אריה but not with כלב. The reason for this may be to further heighten the irony of the comparison. The dog seems to have been regarded as an object of contempt<sup>39</sup> in ancient Israel, while the lion was used as a symbol of kingship and power and was even used of God<sup>40</sup>: perhaps the force of the article is to imply that it is better even for *any* living dog than for the great lion when it is dead, the imbalance in the proverb matching the imbalance between the things compared.

Although the superficial meaning of v.5 seems to be fairly clear, commentators are divided about how it should be understood at a deeper level: is it to be understood at face value as an admonition to take, in Eaton's words (1983:126), 'the opportunity this present life affords to consider the fact of death, as the Preacher has been constantly urging, and to evaluate life accordingly<sup>41</sup>;' or is it intended ironically, as Loader (1986:109) argues, 'The "advantage" of the living is that they know they must die while those who are already dead

<sup>38</sup>Schoors (1992:114) argues, 'In the end, לַכֶּלֶב in 9,4 seems to be the only clear instance of emphatic *lamed*.' But see Fox (1989:258).

<sup>39</sup>See, e.g., 1 Sam 24:14; 2 Sam 3:8; 16:9.

<sup>40</sup>See Isa 38:13; Hos 13:7; Job 10:16; Lam 3:10.

<sup>41</sup>Cf Davidson (1986:63,64); Fox (1989:258); Gordis (1968:305); Whybray (1989:142).

lack even this knowledge. Such bitter irony! The "advantage" is no advantage'<sup>42</sup>. Both readings are possible, and it seems that the reader cannot be certain in which way the verses were intended. Perhaps this is a deliberate ploy on the part of the author.

Elsewhere in Qohelet the author seems to be troubled by the fact that everyone eventually meets the same fate (2:14-17; 3:19-21; 5:14-16), but in each of these chapters, as here, (s)he proceeds to recommend enjoyment of life (2.24-26; 3:22; 5:17-19; 9:7-9). In 7:2,4 (s)he appears to suggest that contemplation of death is a good thing for the living to practise. However, the observation of the wise dying just like the fool in 2:16 leads to the statement in 2:17 ושנאתי את-החיים; also in 4:2, in seeming contradiction of the surface meaning of 9:5, the author asserts ושבח אני את-המתים שכבר מתו מן-החיים אשר המה חיים עדנה; and in 7:1 (s)he contends that יום המות מיום הולדו [טוב], which appears to amount to the same thing as saying 'it is better to enter death than to enter life.' These two strands within the book seem to be in tension, and we find them intermingled so that no clear unified stance seems to be adopted at any stage.

V.5a displays the careful balance which v.4b seems to lack. The two halves of the proverb revolve around the terms יודעים and אינם יודעים, with the living being those who 'know' and the dead those who 'do not know':

החיים והמתים	יודעים אינם יודעים	שימתו מאומה
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This follows a similar pattern to 8:5,

שומר מצוה ועת ומשפט	לא ידע ידע	דבר רע לב חכם
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There is no surprise in the statement that the dead know nothing, but there may well be considerable irony in the assertion that what the living know is that they will die. What is and is not known becomes an increasingly important feature towards the end of Qohelet.

The structure of the proverb in v.5a also means that the two words from the root מות occur in the middle. There is a progression from 'the living' to 'knowing' to 'they will die' to 'the dead' to 'not knowing' to 'nothing', with everything revolving round 'death' at the centre:

החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אינם יודעים מאומה

<sup>42</sup>Cf Barton (1912:160); Crenshaw (1989:161).



The final part of 9:1-6 seems to start with v.5b. The start of v.5b and the start of v.6b are balanced, but the order of the words changes:

v.5b ואין עוד להם שכר  
v.6b וחלק אין להם עוד

As a result of this balance, and because of its position at the end of the clause, לעולם in v.6b is emphasised. The conclusion to v.6b, בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש, then reminds the reader that the discussion in these verses is still part of the theme of 'what is done under the sun.'

Between the two balanced clauses in v.5b and v.6b there is a statement which recalls v.1, כי נשכח זכרם גם אהרתם גם-שנאתם גם-קנאתם כבר אבדה. The use of גם ... גם ... גם seems to be designed to recall and build upon v.1 in which case one may wonder why קנאה is added to the list when the pair of opposites presumably represents the whole spectrum of emotions. Even if, as most commentators suppose, שנאה and אהבה in v.1 are of God, while here they are human passions, nothing seems to be gained by the addition of a word which is also used in the Hebrew Bible of God<sup>43</sup>. However, in Qohelet קנאת is only used elsewhere in 4:4, and there it is ascribed to people, כל-כשרון המעשה כי היא קנאת-איש מרעהו. There may be no particular importance in the specific word קנאתם: it may have been chosen with the purpose of extending the list from v.1 to give an impression of the comprehensiveness of the statement, and to prolong the monotony of the '-am' sound.

The pronominal suffixes here are usually read subjectively, *their* love, hate, jealousy/zealousness. However, they may also denote the object - love, hate, jealousy/zealousness *of them*. Following the thought of the second half of the previous verse, where it is emphatically stated that the dead will not be remembered, the latter reading may be more appropriate. Moreover, this reading also maintains the ambiguity of v.1, because it is not specifically stated whose love, hate, jealousy/zealousness towards them has been destroyed - is it other people's, or God's, or just love, hate, jealousy/zealousness in general?

#### 14.1.4 9:7-10

9:7-10 is the conclusion to the second half of 8:9-9:10, and like the conclusion to the first half, it includes a verse which issues the 'call to enjoyment'. The reference to eating and

<sup>43</sup>E.g., Deut 29:19; Isa 26:11; 42:13; 63:15; Zech 1:14; etc.

drinking, as well as the use of the words שמחה and טוב, in 9:7 seem clearly to tie in with this theme, but it is 9:9 which most closely resembles the other similar verses, especially 5:17,

ראה היים עם-אשה אשר-אהבת	9:9a
הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב אשר-יפה לאכול-ולשתות	5:17a
כל-ימי היי הבלך אשר נתן-לך	9:9b
ולראות טובה *...* מספר ימי-חיו אשר-נתן-לו האלהים	5:17b
כל ימי הבלך כי הוא חלקך בחיים	9:9c
וב -עמלך אשר-אתה עמל תחת השמש	5:17c
כי-הוא חלקו [*בכל-עמלו ש-יעמל תחת-השמש*]	

In comparing the verses thus, we can see that one important difference between them is the use of הבלך twice in 9:9. What purpose does this word serve which was not required in 5:17? Perhaps it is designed to raise doubts in the reader's mind about the apparent optimism of the verse, in which case the positive nature of 5:17, and all the other similar verses, might also be called into question. Alternatively, it may simply call attention to the fleeting nature of life in this realm 'under the sun', in which case כל-ימי חיי הבלך may rather be a restatement of the phrase מספר ימי חיו in 5:17. The phrase מספר ימי חיים occurs also in 2:3 and 6:12, and 6:12 uses the words מספר and הבל, כל-ימים. כי מי-יודע מה-טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי-חיי הבלו, הבל occurs only twice more, in 2:23 and 5:16 where the context is decidedly negative. The phrase הבל ימי [חיי] is used in two other verses, once in the third person and once in the first person:

הבלו	ימי-חיי	6:12
הבלי	ימי	7:15
הבלך	ימי-חיי	9:9
הבלך	ימי	9:9

Typical of Qohelet, these are all slightly different, and conclude with the second person. Four more differences remain between 9:9 and 5:17. One is the use of the second person in 9:9 to replace the third person of 5:17. This has the effect of applying what has been observed in the third person throughout the thread of verses of which 5:17 is a part to the reader him- or herself. It becomes admonition rather than observation, and this is further emphasised by the use twice in this section of the second person singular pronoun. A second difference is the opening section of 5:17 which is not represented in 9:9. However, the sentiments of this part of the verse are comprehensively covered in 9:7-8. A third difference is that אשר נתן-לך is omitted from 9:9. This is a glaring omission, because it means that האלהים is left without a subject in the verse. The subject presumably is האלהים in v.7, but this is some distance removed.



The final difference is the first part of 9:9 which has no equivalent in 5:17, or indeed elsewhere in Qohelet. אשה occurs only twice elsewhere in this book, in 7:26,28. It is used with the article in 7:26 where it probably means 'woman' rather than 'wife', although the latter is possible. In 7:28 it occurs without the article, but could mean either 'woman' or 'wife'. Usually in the Hebrew Bible אשה takes the article when it refers to a man's wife as oppose to any woman, and this has led some commentators to suppose that the author intends the word to be read as 'woman' here. If this is the case, the phrase could be taken to urge enjoyment of any woman one desires, but it need not necessarily mean this. The call to enjoy life with a woman all the days of your life, may be intended to encourage a man to seek a woman whom he loves, and to enjoy the rest of his life with her. However, as Whybray (1989a:144) points out, 'there is no way of telling whether he is here referring specifically to married life,' and the ambiguity may well be intentional.

A further complication is added by the fact that the second אשר, which is usually understood to refer to כל-ימי חיי הבלך, could also refer to אשה. In this case אשה would be qualified by two relative clauses both ending in הבלך (חיי):

ראה חיים עם-אשה      - אשר-אהבת כל-ימי חיי הבלך  
- אשר נתן-לך תחת השמש כל ימי הבלך

This removes the problem of the repeated phrase, which otherwise produces the nonsensical statement: 'all the days of your life of *hebel* which he gave under the sun all of your days of *hebel*.' RSV, NEB, REB and some commentators<sup>44</sup> ignore this problem and remove the second occurrence of the phrase<sup>45</sup>. Alternatively, the second אשר may be read 'because', giving an interpretation something like, 'Enjoy life with a woman whom you love all the days of your life of *hebel*, because this is what he has given you under the sun all your days of *hebel*: surely it is your lot in life.'

There is clearly a strong emphasis on 'life' in 9:9. The word חיים occurs three times, and there are four terms for the days of a person's life: חיים; כל ימי-חיי הבלך; כל ימי הבלך and חיים again. This provides a striking contrast to 9:1-6. However, it is only in this central part of the passage that life is mentioned: the word does not occur at all in the 24 words either side.

<sup>44</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:161).

<sup>45</sup>It is anyway lacking from LXX<sup>A</sup>, Targ. and some masoretic mss.

The first line of v.7 consists of two balanced halves which pick up on 'eating' and 'drinking' and the words שמחה and טוב from the thread of 'call to enjoyment verses':

לך אכל בשמחה לחמך  
ושתה בלב-טוב יינך

בשמחה and בלב-טוב seem to be used as parallel terms implying that in this instance טוב has no moral sense. This may have a bearing on the expression אין טוב. בשמחה and בטוב occur together in 2:1, אמרתי אני בלבי לכה-נא אנסכה בשמחה וראה בטוב, which also uses the imperative of הלך, but, typical of Qohelet, it is a different form of the imperative.

The second part of the verse is ambiguous because it could mean that God has approved one's deeds in advance, and the verse might then be understood to recommend that one enjoy life to the full because whatever (s)he does is already approved by God<sup>46</sup>; or God's approval may refer to past deeds, in which case the right to enjoy life would be a reward for what a person has done in the past. Alternatively, it may be read to indicate that God approves our actions when we live life to the full as recommended in the first part of the verse, in which case the phrase may serve much the same function as אשר-נתן לו האלהים and מתת אלהים היא elsewhere in Qohelet.

V.8 appears to back up the sentiments expressed in v.7, wishing the reader a joyful life, but there is some tension between the use of כל-עת here and its use elsewhere in Qohelet where it seems to indicate that *everything* has its time:

		לכל-חפץ	ועת	3:1
		את-הכל		3:11
בעתו	עשה יפה	לכל-חפץ	עת-	3:17
עת		לכל-חפץ יש		8:6
עת	אשר נעשה תחת השמש	לכל-	מעשה	8:9

However, the ambiguity of חפץ in 3:1,17; 8:6 and יפה in 3:11 mean that these might also be read to indicate there is a time for all *pleasures* - apart from 8:9 which is uncertain anyway. Nonetheless, 3:4 does clearly state,

עת לבכות ועת לשחוק  
עת ספור ועת רקוד

This may suggest that it is *not* appropriate always to be joyful. Moreover, this seems to be the point of some of the proverbs in 7:1-8, especially משה בית אל-מלכת אל-בית משה in v.2; טוב ללכת אל-בית אבל מלכת אל-בית משה in v.3; and לב חכמים בבית אבל ולב כסילים בבית שמחה in v.4.

<sup>46</sup>Clemens (1994:8) writes, 'God has already approved our eating and word (9:7), because they were prescribed in Eden.'



The end of v.9 and all of v.10 serve to draw to a conclusion the discussion in Qohelet of the deeds and the work that are done under the sun. Three different words from the root עשה are used, לעשות, עשה and מעשה, and the root עמל is used twice, ובעמלך and עמל. עמל ובעמלך אשר-אתה עמל תחת השמש may recall the discussion of 'work' in ch.2 because only once since then, in 5:17, has a similar expression occurred:

תחת השמש	יעמל	ש-	עמלו	ב-כל-	1:3
עמלתי לעשות ... תחת השמש	עמלתי לעשות	ש-	עמל	וב-	2:11
תחת השמש	עמל	שאני	עמלי	כל-	2:18
עמלתי ושחכמתי תחת השמש	עמלתי ושחכמתי	ש-	עמלי	ב-כל-	2:19
תחת השמש	עמלתי	ש-	העמל	כל-	2:20
תחת השמש	עמל	שהוא	עמלו וברעיון לבו	ב-כל-	2:22
תחת-השמש	יעמל	ש-	עמלו	ב-כל-	5:17
תחת השמש	עמל	אשר-אתה	עמלך	וב-	9:9

Again all these are slightly different, and the final one in 9:9 is in the second person. Since this expression occurs here for the final time, 9:9-10 may also serve as an answer to the question in 1:3: ultimately there is no advantage for a person from all the work they do under the sun, because none of it continues beyond death.

The phrase כל אשר תמצא ירך לעשות in v.10 recalls 8:17 at the end of the first half of 8:9-9:10, where the מצא and עשה both occur three times. However, in 8:17 it is stated three times that people are unable to 'find out' the deeds that are done, while in 9:10 the reader is admonished to do all the deeds that his/her hands can 'find' to do. The phrase אשר תמצא ירך occurs elsewhere in Judg 9:33; 1 Sam 10:7; 25:8<sup>47</sup>, where it seems to bear the sense of 'whatever the opportunity affords', so that Qoh 9:10 probably means something like, 'whatever opportunities for action present themselves to you, act with all your strength.' However, Fox (1989:260) reads the verse rather differently when he maintains that 'Qohelet is advising us to expend effort *only* in accordance with our abilities' [our emphasis]. Such a reading strips the verse of any positive sense of actively seeking to make the most out of life. However, to obtain such a reading, Fox translates כל אשר תמצא ירך לעשות as 'all that you are able to do' (1989:259), which misrepresents the usual sense of the idiom, and he follows LXX rather than MT in reading בכחך for בכחך (1989:260). Our reading finds particular support in the phrase in 1 Sam 10:7, עשה לך אשר תמצא ירך כי האלהים עמך.

<sup>47</sup>See also Lev 12:8; 25:28; Isa 10:10. However, the idiom in Isa 10:10 seems to be different. There the Lord says ... לממלכת האליל. כאשר מצאה ידי, and in verse thirteen, בכח ידי עשיתי ובחכמתי. The use of מצאה ידי, and בכח ידי עשיתי is noteworthy because of its closeness to Qoh 9:10, and also בחכמתי is reminiscent of earlier verses in Qohelet, but it would appear that מצאה ידי ל- conveys a different sense than תמצא ירך in our verse.

לדעת, חכמה, and דעת, מעשה, in the second half of 9:10, recall major themes which recur several times throughout Qohelet. We noted above that words from the roots חכם and ידע occur together a number of times in Qohelet, and such is the case in this section where they also occur together in 8:16,17. However, on each occasion the combination of the two is different:

לדעת חכמה	8:16
✕	
החכם לדעת	8:17
✕	
ודעת וחכמה	9:10

חשבון, on the other hand, occurs elsewhere in Qohelet (and, indeed, the Hebrew Bible) only in the final few verses of ch.7 (vv.25,27,29), where the root מצא also makes most of its appearances. חשבון seems there to mean something like 'calculation' or to indicate the result of a calculation. 7:25 is particularly pertinent because the words דעת and חכמה occur there as well, סבותי אני ולבי לדעת ולתור ובקש חכמה וחשבון. It may be that 9:10 specifically alludes to the search which was intimated in 7:25, and assures the reader that however much or little of these things he or she may find during his or her life, they are not to be found in sheol.

שאל is mentioned only here in Qohelet, which seems somewhat surprising when we consider how many allusions are made to death. However, we may recall that the root מות is also used relatively infrequently, and can hardly be classed among the most frequently recurring roots in the book.

We have commented already on the participle הלך in the final clause of this verse. One further point we should note is that by using the participial form plus אתה, not only does the author stress the on-going journey towards sheol, but (s)he also emphasises that *you*, the reader, are going there. This is conveyed by the very concise and balanced clause with which this section ends, אשר אתה הלך שמה.

## 14.2 Conclusions

There are a number of points of ambiguity in this section which are similar to what we have seen earlier in the book: for instance, the accents in 8:9 seems to confuse rather than aid the interpretation of that verse; the meaning of 8:10 is obscure and it is interpreted in a number of different ways by the commentators; vv.10-12 use עשה in a variety of ways; אשר is also



used many times and in different ways throughout 8:8-9:10 and is often ambiguous; the precise implications of 8:11-13 are unclear, and these verses are treated very differently, and even in contradictory ways, by the commentators; the juxtaposition of 8:12,13 and 8:14 leaves a considerable gap for the reader to fill in; the apparently positive tone of 8:15, and the absence of any word from the root עשה raise questions about the role this verse plays in its context; the second half of 8:16 seems to intrude between v.16a and v.17; the phrase in 8:17, לא יוכל האדם למצוא could be read either with what precedes or with what follows it, as could את-כל-זה in 9:1; the role of the single term טוב in 9:1 is far from clear, as also is the first word of v.2, הכל, the phrase לב בני-האדם מלא-רע והוללות בלבבם in v.3, and יבחר/יחבר in v.4; there is considerable disagreement concerning the tone of v.5 - is it positive, negative or deeply ironic; the pronominal suffixes in 9:6 could be read in different ways, giving a rather different meaning to the verse; 9:7-10 tie in closely with the other verses issuing the 'call to enjoyment', but again there is disagreement over just how positive these verses really are - do they encourage the reader to enjoy to the full the life that God has given him/her, or do they simply advise making the best of a bad lot?

The section 8:8-9:10 clearly deals with the deeds that are performed under the sun. However, it is not so clear what attitude the author adopts towards the deeds (s)he describes. 8:8-14 addresses the issue of *evil* deeds, and the author complains about the unfair treatment of the righteous and the wicked, while also affirming that it will go well for the righteous and badly for the wicked. In 8:15-17 (s)he lauds pleasure, and argues that there is nothing good for people but to eat and drink and enjoy the days that God gives them; but (s)he also asserts that however hard people may try, they can never understand all that is done under the sun. In 9:1-6 the author states that no matter what people do, they all meet the same end, death; but it is also affirmed that life is better than death. 9:7-10 encourages the reader to make the most of the few days God gives him/her under the sun, but points out that all deeds will cease in sheol.

These passages allow for quite different readings, lying between the extremes of hope and cynicism. On the one hand, they may be interpreted as an exhortation to make the most of the life God gives, even in face of what appear to be unfair consequences of good and evil deeds, in the firm belief that the God who approves our (good?) deeds will work things out

justly even if they are beyond our comprehension. On the other hand, they may be understood as an exhortation to grasp what joy one can in life, because there is no guarantee either that 'it will go well for the good, and badly for the wicked', as tradition would have it, or that there will be any kind of recompense after this life is over. In fact, neither of these readings is wholly satisfactory because whatever is regarded as central, some of those aspects which are marginalised sit uneasily in relation to that centre. It seems impossible to produce an interpretation which does away with such tensions. But this is true also of life as we experience it, and is, perhaps, one reason why people can never figure out 'all the deeds that are done under the sun.'



## CHAPTER 15, Wisdom and Folly, and What Is and Is Not Known (9:11-11:6)

### 15.1 Commentary

#### 15.1.1 9:11-16

9:11 returns, after the second person address in 9:7-10, to the first person by using a term which occurs in a similar phrase in 4:1,7:

ושבתי אני	ואראה את-כל-העשקים אשר נעשים	תחת השמש	4:1
ושבתי אני	ואראה הבל	תחת השמש	4:7
שבתי	ו-ראה	תחת-השמש	9:11

The first clause of 9:11 acts as an introduction; there follow five observations which lead to the conclusion with which the verse closes. The conclusion, **כי עת ופגע יקרה את-כלם**, is the precise centre of 9:11-12, and it bears a striking resemblance to the phrase at the centre of 2:11-19, which discusses wisdom and folly, and might also be interpreted as bemoaning the inappropriateness of one fate befalling wise and foolish alike:

שמקרה אחד יקרה את-כלם	2:14
עת ופגע יקרה את-כלם	9:11

This may suggest that the phrases **מקרה אחד** and **עת ופגע** indicate the same thing, the latter meaning 'the time of one's fate', fate in this instance signifying death<sup>1</sup>. We might recall that 3:19-20; 6:6 and 9:2,3 also bear similarities:

שמקרה אחד יקרה את-כלם	2:14
מקרה אחד	3:19,20
לכל מקרה אחד	6:6
מקרה אחד	8:2
לכל מקרה אחד	9:3
יקרה את-כלם	9:11
עת ופגע	

Despite the common elements, we note again that each verse is different. **פגע** may be a synonym for **מקרה** in 2:14; 3:19; and 9:3,6, and it is notable that the root **קרה** occurs only in 2:11-91; 3:11-21; 9:1-6 and in 9:11. Also the first part of v.12 seems to support this interpretation: it picks up the last part of v.11 and might suggest that people do not know the time of their death:

וגם לא לידעים חן	v.11
כי-עת ופגע יקרה את-כלם	
גם לא-ידע	v.12
האדם את-עתו	

<sup>1</sup>Cf, e.g., Fox (1989:260); Ogden (1982:165); Whybray (1989:146). But note that LXX has *καιρος και απαντημα*.

This ties in well with the verses asserting human inability to know the future, especially 10:14, **לא-ידע האדם מה-שיהיה** - indeed, only in 9:12 and 10:14 does the expression **לא-ידע האדם** occur. It also ties in with the end of 7:17, **למה תמות בלא עתך**. However, the connection with what could be a contrary assertion in 8:5, **ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם** is more difficult to determine, but this clause is very important because the same difficulty arises over the *waw* between **עת** and **משפט** in 8:5, and between **עת** and **פגע** here.

The list in 9:11 falls into two parts distinguished by **לא** in the first half, and **גם לא** in the second half. The first part describes physical prowess, and the second half intellectual ability, and the list as a whole is probably intended to represent the best of human capacities. However, the use of the negative adverb **לא** five times effectively negates the ultimate value of these attributes. The reason for this negation is then given in the final clause of the verse which might be interpreted, 'the time of death comes to them all.' The fact that death is only alluded to in a rather ambiguous way is in keeping with our observation above that although death is a key element in Qohelet, it is explicitly mentioned only a few times.

There is considerable irony in the words used in the similes in v.12. The same verb, **אחז**, is used for trapping fish and birds and is not used in this way elsewhere. It is applied in 2:3 and 7:18 specifically to human action, as often elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible where it is also used of God<sup>2</sup>. By contrast, the verb used for trapping people, **יקש**, is often used with animals. This helps to convey a sense of the similarity of the fate of animals and people - much as in 3:19, **מקרה בני-האדם ומקרה הבהמה ומקרה אחד להם כמות זה מן מות זה**. The same sense is given by the parallel between **מצודה רעה** (a word from the same root, **מצודים**, being used in relation to trapping people in v.14<sup>3</sup>) and **עת רעה**: just as fish are caught in an 'evil net' so people are caught for an 'evil time'. This may refer to a person's death, which would tie in with the trapping of a fish or bird which is likely to result in a sudden and untimely death for the creature. But if it is read with 3:1-8 in mind, it might be interpreted to mean that people are ensnared by 'times' about which they can do nothing. There seem, then, to be three ways

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ps 73:23; 77:5. Ps 139:9-10 provides a particularly pertinent example because of its reference to 'taking wings' (like a bird) and 'dwelling in the sea' (like a fish):

אשא כנפי-שחר אשמנה באחרית ים  
גם-שם ירך תנחני ותאחזני מינך

<sup>3</sup>**מצודה** is one of a number of nouns where the gender in Qohelet is the opposite of that found elsewhere. Other examples offered by Schoors (1992:68-9) are **מרוץ** (9:11; cf 2 Sam 18:27); **שתי** (10:17; cf Esth 1:8); **בחורות** (11:9; 12:1; cf Num 11:28); **טחנה** (12:4; cf Lam 5:13); **יגעה** (12:12; cf Gen 31:42); **משמרות** (12:11; cf Isa 41:7).



in which v.12 could be read. Either it indicates that all people are ensnared by the time of their death which suddenly falls upon them. Or people are ensnared specifically when death falls *suddenly* upon them, perhaps when they are not expecting it, or if it happens 'before its time' as in 7:17. Or it may not refer to death at all, and be understood something like this:

People do not know the timing of their lives: as fish may be caught in a net, or birds in a trap, so they may be ensnared by the sudden onset of a time of misfortune.

Vv.13-15 tell a short story which provides an illustration of inappropriate consequences. The story appears initially to be a fairly typical tale about might being overcome by the wisdom of one poor man (sic). This is intimated in the introduction in v.13 where *חכמה* and *גדולה* are both used. *זה ... חכמה* may be an example of apposition<sup>4</sup>. There seems to be no convincing reason for deleting *חכמה* as suggested in BHS, particularly as it is attested in the versions, and although the phrase is awkward and unlike anything else in Qohelet, it may be designed to emphasise 'wisdom'. The meaning may be reasonably well represented in the translation in RSV, 'this example of wisdom.'

The clause *וגדולה היא אלי* introduces a key word of the passage, but uses it in a different sense to its later usages. This seems to be a deliberate irony. It also means that *גדול* is used in two different ways, and two different words, *גדול* in v.14 and *גבורה* in v.16, are used to convey the same thing. *גדול* does not bear the same sense elsewhere in Qohelet, or anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. The closest parallels in Qohelet are *ורבה היא על-האדם* in 6:1 and *רבה עליו* in 8:6. The construction of 6:1 and 9:13 is similar:

response	observation "under the sun"	
<i>ורבה היא על-האדם</i>	<i>יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש</i>	6:1
<i>וגדולה היא אלי</i>	<i>גם-זה ראיתי חכמה תחת השמש</i>	9:13

The tale starts with a clause which sets the scene: there is a *small* city with *few* people in it. There then follow two clauses describing an attack on the city - the greatness of the attack is emphasised by the use twice of the adjective *גדול* in parallel phrase:

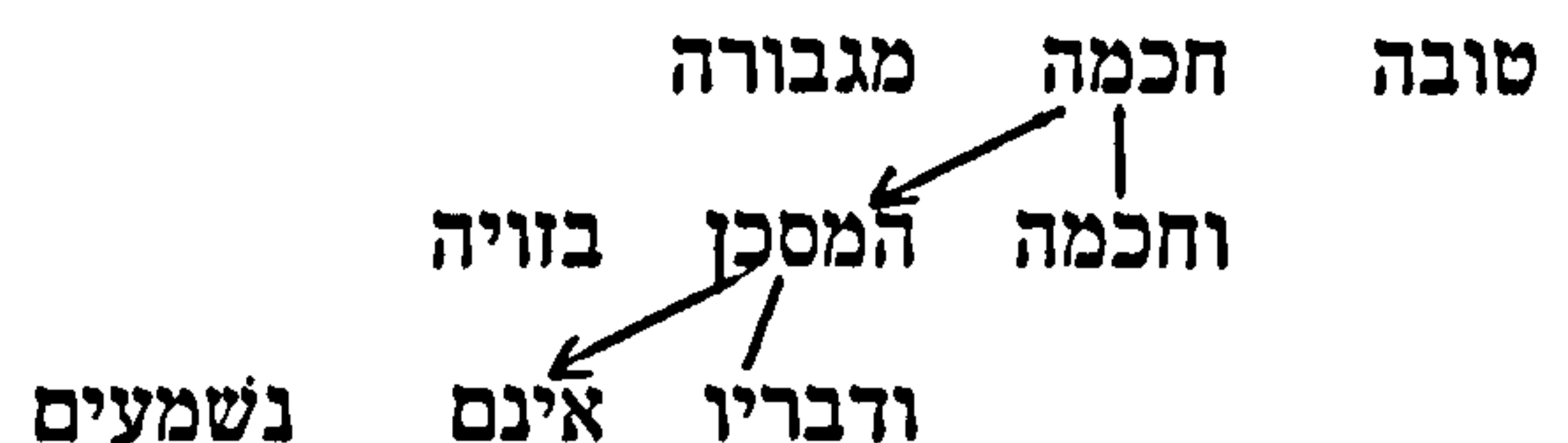
*ובא- אליה מלך גדול*  
*ובנה עליה מצודים גדלים*

These come either side of the words *וסבב אתה* which imply a reasonable size of army. The salvation of the city is also described in two parallel clauses which emphasise the role of wisdom in overcoming the attacker's might:

<sup>4</sup>Cf Ges<sup>K</sup> (131).

So far the tale presents few surprises - the underdogs have been saved from the great might of their attackers by the wisdom of one poor man. This is the stuff of folk tales the world over. However, typical of Qohelet, there is a sting in the tail which comes in the final clause of v.15 - nobody remembered the poor man. There is an important change in this clause from the first one: **חכם איש מסכן** has become **את-האיש המסכן ההוא**, that is to say, the emphasis has shifted from the man's *wisdom* in the previous two clauses to his *poverty* in the last clause.

This is picked up in the conclusion in v.16. It starts by re-affirming, with a 'better than' saying, that wisdom is indeed better than might. There then follow two balanced clauses which emphasise that wisdom is useless if the one who possesses it is poor. The positive 'better than' saying revolves round the word 'wisdom', 'better *wisdom* than might'. The next clause picks up wisdom from the first, but then has **המסכן** at the centre so that there is a progression from wisdom to *the poor person*. The final clause picks up 'the poor person' in the pronominal suffix on **ודבריו**, then turns round the word 'nobody': 'his words *nobody* listens to':



It might also be noted that each clause increases in length by one letter, which may portray the increasing intensity of the statements:

טובה חכמה מגבורה  
וחכמה המסכן בוזיה  
ודבריו אין נשמעים

There is support elsewhere for these sentiments in the sayings in 8:11, **טובה חכמה עם-נהלה**, and in the following verse, **בצל החכמה בצל הכסף**.

### 15.1.2 9:17-10:4

There seems to be some tension between the assertion in v.16 that the words of the wise are not heeded, and the claim in v.17 that the words of the wise heard in quiet are listened to. The difference is the word **המסכן** in v.16: where at the end of v.15 **חכם** was dropped so as to effect a particular focus on the poverty of the man, in v.17 **מסכן** is omitted so



that 'wisdom' is emphasised over 'folly'. However, this also draws greater attention to מסכן in the previous section, because it is made clear that this is what prevents the words of a wise person being heeded.

9:17 seems to require טובים to complete the type of comparison which is so familiar in Qohelet<sup>5</sup>, and which occurs in the verses either side of it,

מגבורה	חכמה	טובה	v.16
מועקת מושל בכסילים	חכמים בנחת נשמעים	דברי	v.17
מכלי קרב	חכמה	טובה	v.18

It may be that the sense of the מן ... טוב saying in the previous verse is continued in v.17, as we find also in 7:1. However, in 7:1 the saying which omits טוב follows directly from a saying in which it is used, and both are in the same verse. 4:17, on the other hand, may provide an example of a verse where טוב is presupposed without there being a מן ... טוב saying preceding it. However there are other explanations for 4:17 which do not require טוב to be supplied or assumed, and the same applies here. Ges<sup>K</sup> (116e) cites a number of examples from the Hebrew Bible where the niph'al participle has the sense of the Latin gerundive. If this applies here the first half of 9:17 could be read, 'the words of the wise spoken in quiet are worthy to be heard more than the shouting of a ruler among fools'<sup>6</sup>. But we should note that even if טוב is not read from v.16, מן is sometimes used alone to signify superiority of one thing over another<sup>7</sup>, so that it may be best rendered '*better* than', even without the טוב.

An alternative would be to move the disjunctive accent to בנחת and to read the verse, 'the words of the wise spoken in quiet are heard more than the shouting of a ruler among fools'<sup>8</sup>. This would display an ironic twist typical of our author: though a ruler shout, if it be among fools it will be heard less than the words of the wise however softly spoken.

Whatever the explanation, attention is drawn to this verse because it lacks the טוב, and because it lies between two very similar verses, both of nine words, which open with parallel affirmations of the value of wisdom over might that are then modified by the rest of the verse:

טובה חכמה מגבורה	וחכמה המסכן בזויה ודבריו אינם נשמעים	v.16
טובה חכמה מכלי קרב	וחוטא אחד יאבד טובה הרבה	v.18

<sup>5</sup>Cf, e.g., Barton (1912:168); Crenshaw (1988:167).

<sup>6</sup>Cf Whybray (1989:149).

<sup>7</sup>Ges<sup>K</sup>, 133b cites Gen 29:30; 37:3; Deut 14:2; 1 Sam 2:29; Hos 6:6; Job 7:15 and Qoh 2:13 as examples.

<sup>8</sup>Cf Fox (1989:264).

Thus while v.17 asserts the value of wisdom over folly, v.16 indicates that wisdom is useless without wealth, and v.18 claims that even though a wise person achieve much good, it may be readily destroyed by one 'sinner'. This ties in well with the theme of the previous section regarding 'inappropriate consequences'.

Words from the root נוח occur three times in this passage (9:17; 10:4,4), and all three bear a different meaning. Of particular note is the expression אל-תנוח in 10:4, which occurs twice elsewhere in Qohelet. In 10:4 it is used intransitively and appears to counsel against taking any action, 'do not *leave*', while אל-תנוח ירך in 7:18 and 11:6 is transitive and advises taking action, 'do not *withhold* your hand'. The ambiguity of the verb is roughly captured by the English verb 'leave' which can mean either 'to go away from, depart', or 'let remain'. The difference in this case is not absolute, but rather one of perspective: when I *leave* a place, I may *leave* behind me some object, which I give *leave* to someone to use. Thus in 2:18 the author must *leave* the fruit of his work for someone else when he dies; in 5:11 riches do not give their owner *leave* to sleep; and in 7:18 and 11:6 the reader is advised not to *leave* his hand out of the activity being described. However, this illustration fails to explain 7:9 which appears to have a directly opposite meaning to the expression in 10:4, כעס בחיק כסילים ינוח, 'anger lodges/remains in the bosom of fools.' On this basis the phrase in 10:4 ought to read, 'do not remain in your place'. It seems that there is a degree of ambiguity in the expression. This is further complicated by the second word in 10:4 from the root נוח which seems to be closer to the noun נחת, 'rest, quietness', that appears in 4:6; 6:5 and 9:17. This being the case, the author advises in the first half of the verse that one *not* leave his or her place, then goes on in positive terms to say מרפא יניה חטאים גדולים. The use of this root in two such different ways within the same verse is typical of our author's use of language, but BHS gets around it by suggesting יניה be replaced with יניא from the root נוא, 'hinder, restrain, frustrate'. However, it might be recalled that there is similar ambiguity around the admonition in 8:3, where the expression אל-תבהל can be understood in two different ways, and could be read either as the end of 8:2 or the beginning of v.3, [אל-תבהל] מפניו תלך אל-תעמד בדבר רע. Both verses may refer to 'leaving (or not) a ruler's presence'.

By contrast to the use of נוח with different meanings, two different roots are used for folly, כסל and סכל. As we have noted before, there seems to be no difference in meaning, but



they may serve to raise questions in the reader's mind concerning any difference between them. In view of the contrast in v.18 between חכמה and חוטא, and the fact that either כסל or סכל is used in every verse apart from those where חטא occurs, it may be that חטא is used as a near-synonym to כסל/סכל<sup>9</sup>. However, we should also note that there may be a contrast in the second half of 9:18 between חוטא and טובה, and in both verses 'sin' would be an appropriate translation.

There is also a word play on טובה which occurs at the beginning and end of 9:18. In the first instance it is used as part of the 'better than' saying, in the second it is a noun, 'good'. A strong contrast is drawn between חוטא אחד and טובה הרבה in the second half of the verse, these revolving round the verb יאבד,



There is also a contrast drawn between טובה הרבה and the expression חטאים גדולים in 10:4,

וחוטא אחד

טובה הרבה

חטאים גדולים

10:1 appears to restate in proverbial form the sentiments of 9:18: wisdom can be outweighed by a little folly in the same way that even a fly can pollute oil or perfume. However, the verse is fraught with problems and uncertainties.

The first difficulty concerns the expression זבובי מות, with which the verse opens. These words appear to be in a construct relationship which might be rendered, 'flies of death'. This could either mean that the flies themselves are dead, or possibly dying<sup>10</sup>, or that they bring death. While both are possible, the former might have been more simply expressed using an adjective, זבובים מתים, and the latter finds a parallel in the expression כלי מות, 'deadly weapons', in Ps 7:14. Nonetheless, the former does seem to fit the context better. However, in view of the singular verbs which follow, Fox (1989:261,264) suggests redividing

<sup>9</sup>So, e.g., Fox and Porten (1978:30).

<sup>10</sup>See Gordis (1968:314) who argues on the basis of 'such examples of the epexegetical genitive as בן הכות, Deut 25:2, "man worthy of flogging"; 1 Sam 20:31, בן מות, "a man destined to die"; אנשי מות, 2 Sam 19:29.'

the consonants from זבובי מות to זבוב ימות, and repointing the text so that it means 'a fly dies'.

The word יביע is from a root נבע which occurs here and in 12:6 in Qohelet, and only twelve times elsewhere. Two of these are in Isa. (35:7; 49:10); six in Pss. (19:3; 59:8; 78:2; 94:4; 119:171; 145:7); and four in Prov. (1:23; 15:2,28; 18:4). The two occurrences in Isa. refer to a literal 'gushing' of water from a spring, while all the others use the word metaphorically to speak of words 'gushing' from someone's mouth - indeed, in Prov 18:4 the metaphor is expressed in terms of words of wisdom being a 'gushing stream'. המבוע in Qoh 12:6, seems to refer to a literal spring, or perhaps a well. However, neither the literal nor the metaphorical sense seems appropriate in 10:1. It could be, as Crenshaw (1988:168-169) and Whybray (1989a:150) suggest, that its meaning here is 'bubble up' and by extension 'ferment'. However, BHS and Barton (1912:168) recommend it be deleted as a dittograph; Gordis (1968:315), following LXX, argues that 'the context ... requires a noun ... to mean a "container"'; and Fox (1989: 265) contends that the word in MT does not make sense and should be emended to גביע, 'cup, bowl', which is perhaps what lies behind σκευασιαν in LXX.

Whybray (1989a:150) comments on the second half of the verse that it 'has almost certainly suffered some textual corruption', and it undoubtedly presents some difficulties for the interpreter. As it stands the phrase might best be rendered 'more precious/weighty than wisdom and than honour is a little folly.' We might have expected a waw between מחכמה and מכבוד, but the waw is also absent between יבאיש and יביע (assuming that this is a second verb) in the first half of the verse, and there are other occasions in Qohelet (e.g., עת ומשפט in 8:5,6) where the waw seems to intrude. It may be argued that the reader would expect an adjective following חכמה to contrast with מעט following סכלות, and, indeed, this is represented in both Crenshaw (1988:168) and Gordis's (1968:190) translations. Gordis views כבוד as a noun used in an adverbial sense. It may be that this statement draws the implications of 9:18 a stage further: there one sin could destroy much good, here a little folly can carry more weight than wisdom ... and honour. Fox (1989:261,262) takes a different approach again. He reads יקר with the first half of the verse, then emends מכבוד to תכבד so that the second half of the verse reads, 'a little folly is more weighty than wisdom'.



The word יקר may be ironic. Its usual meaning in the Hebrew Bible is 'precious', and this may be how the reader responds to it directly after reading about the 'perfumer's oil'. However, in Aramaic (e.g., Dan 2:11), and possibly in Ps 116:15, it seems to have developed the meaning 'of great consequence', which seems more appropriate for the second half of the verse. Nonetheless, the ambiguity may be intentional. However the word is translated it makes for a striking statement - that a little folly carries more weight or is more precious than both wisdom and honour.

V.2 takes the form of a concise and carefully balanced proverb, of identical form to that found in 7:4, even to the extent of lacking the *athnah* which we find in almost every other verse of the book,

לב חכמים בבית אבל	ולב כסילים בבית שמחה	7:4
לב חכם לימינו	ולב כסיל לשמאלו	10:2

The sentiments of the verse are similar to 2:14a, החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולך. However, what *precisely* is indicated by 'his right hand' and 'his left' is not clear, and is perhaps deliberately left to the reader's imagination. Certainly elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the right hand denotes a place of favour<sup>11</sup>, or of protection<sup>12</sup>, or of power<sup>13</sup>, and any of these might be applicable here - implying that the heart of the wise person will lead him or her into favourable circumstances or safety, or give him or her power, while the fool's heart will instead lead away from these things. But it is not clear from the usage of these terms elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, that they may denote moral goodness on the one hand, and moral evil on the other. Indeed, where the two terms are used together, they often *both* denote deviation from righteousness, as in Josh 1:7<sup>14</sup>:

רק חזק ואמץ מאד לשמר לעשות ככל-התורה אשר צוך משה עבדי אל-תסור ממנו ימין ושמאל למען תשכיל בכל אשר תלך

כשהסכל in v.3 seems, as BHS suggests, to be another example of a conflation in the *ketibh* of *qere*, כשסכל and a variant, כהסכל. In this instance the meaning of the verse is little affected. The sentiments are similar to 10:15, עמל הכסילים תיגענו אשר לא-ידע ללכת אל-עיר, and again tie in with 2:14, החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולך. Notably, all these use dif-

<sup>11</sup>Cf, e.g., 1 Kgs 2:19; Ps 16:11; 45:10; 110:1; etc.

<sup>12</sup>Cf, e.g., Isa 41:13; Ps 18:36; 63:9; etc.

<sup>13</sup>Cf, e.g., Exod 15:6,12; Ps 20:7; 98:1; etc.

<sup>14</sup>Cf, e.g., Deut 17:11,20; 28:14; Josh 23:6; 2 Kgs 22:2.

ferent forms of the verb הלך, and this may tie in with the rather unusual use of the verb in 6:8-9, כי מה-יותר לחכם מן-הכסיל מה-לעני יודע להלך נגד החיים טוב מראה עינים מהלך-נפש.

### 15.1.3 10:5-7

This passage sees the final occurrence of the key expression תחת השמש. Moreover, ראיתי in 10:7 is the last time this word occurs, and, in fact, the final time the author writes in the first person. 10:5-7, then, sees the end of the thread of verses, running through all of the first nine chapters of the book, which record what the author him- or herself has observed 'under the sun'. Moreover, there are thirty-seven verses remaining, exactly a sixth of the book (which recalls Wright's theory about the importance of the numerical value of the letters of the key word הבל, 37), that contain no first person usage, nor the 'key' phrase תחת השמש.

There is an element of ambiguity in v.5. This revolves around the use of the word מלפני. Were the sin of the king's doing, this could have been unambiguously described as coming from the king simply by the use of the preposition מן- before השליט. However, by the use of מלפני uncertainty is generated about whether the sin comes from the king himself, or from someone in his presence - perhaps a usurper. Vv.6-7 lend support to the latter possibility. There is similar ambiguity over the term דבר רע in 8:3,5.

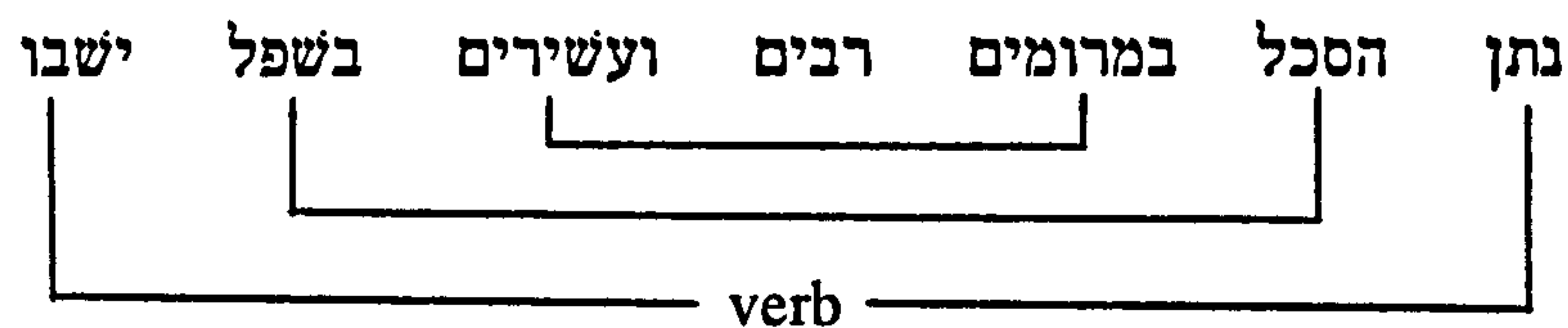
The opening verb of v.6, נתן, is a niph'al perfect, and its subject is not clear either. It could be that the ruler of the previous verse causes fools to be thus exalted, or it may be that he is overthrown by someone who sets a fool in his place. Or again, it could be that someone removes his wealthy courtiers so that his power is removed, and replaces them with fools. It is not clear whether the disruption of the social order is the problem which the author observes, or if it is incidental to the real wrong - perhaps the overthrow of the ruler. Either reading is possible.

If רבים in v.6 is read with the first half of the verse, we would have expected it to take the article like במרומים<sup>15</sup>. However, our author displays considerable inconsistency with regard to agreement between noun and adjective. It is also possible, as, for example, Whitley (1979:88) and Whybray (1989a:152) suggest, to ignore the *athnah* and take רבים with the second half of the verse and read it as '[the] great', 'The fool is set in exalted places, and the

<sup>15</sup>See also לעני יודע in 6:8. Cf Schoors (1992:165-6).



great and the rich will sit in the lowly place.’ רבים is the middle word of the verse and, without the aid of punctuation, could be read with either half. In fact, the verse is a chiasmus which illustrates the social reversal in a literary way: the expected pairing of words (of equal length) occur at the same point either side of the centre, but when the verse is read from start to finish these pairings are disrupted:



We should note that while a passive verb is applied to **הַסֵּבֵל**, he/it ‘*is placed*’, the active imperfect is used for **עֲשִׂירִים**, ‘*they will sit*’. The fool has to take no action to bring about this exaltation, but it seems that this results in the rich being forced to take a lowly position. The inappropriateness of the situation is further indicated by the mismatch of singulars and plurals: ‘the fool (singular) is put in many high places (plural), and the rich (plural) sit in the lowly place (singular).’

Where the contrast in v.6 was between **הסכל** and **עשירים**, which are not mutually exclusive, in v.7 the contrast represents genuinely opposite ends of a spectrum: **עבדים** and **שרים**. However, the two verses run parallel in that those people usually associated with a lowly position are observed in an exalted position in the first half of both verses, and those usually associated with an exalted position are observed in a lowly position in the second half.

**15.1.4      10:8-14a**

The main difficulties for translation and interpretation in this passage occur in v.10. In its context it may be that the beginning of v.10 refers back to the chopping of trees in the previous verse<sup>16</sup>. If this is the case, בוקע in v.9 may be the antecedent of הוּא here. Alternatively, הוּא may be used in an indefinite or impersonal sense as ‘one’<sup>17</sup>, or mean ‘it’ and refer to the axe<sup>18</sup>. Against the former Whybray (1989a:153) points out that ‘this would be a unique meaning for *hu*’: the other supposed examples cited by Gordis (Job 8:16; 13:28) are best explained in other ways’, although the example in Job 13:28 does provide a reasonably close

<sup>16</sup>So, e.g., Barton (1912:172); Fox (1989:268).

<sup>17</sup>So, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:173); Gordis (1969:322); Ogden (1987:170).

<sup>18</sup>Whybray (1989:153).

parallel. Against the latter it should be noted that it does not make sense in the verse as it stands, unless פנים is emended to לפנים, which is then read 'beforehand' as Gordis (1968:322)<sup>19</sup> suggests.

However, there are other difficulties in the clause which need to be addressed before a decision can be reached on this matter<sup>20</sup>. The first thing we should notice is that the root קהה occurs only three times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and on each occasion it is the qal form which is used rather than the piel as here. The qal is also common in later Hebrew. In Jer 31:29,30 and Ezek 18:2 it seems to be used in an idiomatic sense with reference to teeth being dulled or 'set on edge' (RSV, REB). Thus its meaning here may be the literal sense of 'dulled' from which that idiom derived. However, it is not used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as it is here.

The word ברזל, which also occurs only here in Qohelet, is used elsewhere of iron or an iron tool. In Deut 19:5 and 2 Kgs 6:5,6 it appears to refer to an axe for chopping wood, which would fit in with the mention of בוקע עצים in the previous verse. But in 2 Sam 23:7 and Job 41:29 the tool described is a weapon of war, which might be more in keeping with the word חילים later in the verse.

פנים means 'face' or 'front part'. This does not make sense in the context of this verse. A number of commentators refer to Ezek 21:21, where they argue that פנים is used of the edge of a sword<sup>21</sup>. However, it is by no means certain that this is the meaning of the word in that verse, and it provides a poor foundation on which to base the translation here. The alternative is to read it as לפנים as mentioned above.

קלקל is the pilpel of קלל. The root occurs on five other occasions in Qohelet, four of which (7:21,22; 10:20,20) mean 'curse', and one in 9:11 means 'swift'. Its meaning here, then, is unique in Qohelet, and in fact rare elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In Ezek 1:7 and Dan 10:6 the expression נהשת קלל means 'polished bronze', and presumably its meaning here is something similar - polished, and by extension, sharpened.

We can now see that there is uncertainty over almost every word in the protasis, and the apodosis, too, poses its problems. חילים literally means 'warriors', and this ties in with

<sup>19</sup>Cf Ogden (1987:170); Whybray (1989:153).

<sup>20</sup>Barton (1912:177) went so far as to contend that 10:10 is 'linguistically the most difficult verse in the book'.

<sup>21</sup>Cf, e.g., Barton (1912:177); Crenshaw (1988:173).



the mention earlier of ברזל which, as we noted above, can be used of iron weapons. However, this seems to be an inappropriate rendering for the word here where it appears instead to convey the abstract notion of strength. In this case it might be regarded as a singular, even though it is plural in form, and so take a singular verb. The problem then arises as to whether it is the object or the subject of the clause. The piel גבר probably means 'cause to be strong', in which case either הילים will be made strong, that is increased, and as subject is placed at the front of the clause for emphasis; or 'he' (the subject of the verb, be it בוקע from the previous verse or an impersonal 'one') must cause הילים to increase, that is exert more effort. The latter seems to fit the context better, but either way the expression is awkward. A similar expression, meaning 'grow in strength', is found in Job 21:7, although the qal of גבר is used there; and in 1 Chr 7:5,7,11,40 we find the expression גבורי הילים where גבורים serves as the noun and is modified by the adjective הילים.

Particular attention is drawn to the phrase יתרון הכשיר חכמה by the fact that it disturbs the balance of vv.10-11. It is also important to note that the word חכמה is the middle word in vv.8-14a. It may be, then, that in the midst of these proverbs concerning folly, the author specifically draws attention to the fact that there is an advantage in wisdom, this being contrasted with the fools babbling in v.14a. However, it is far from clear what precisely the phrase יתרון הכשיר חכמה means. יתרון and חכמה are nouns with which we are familiar from the earlier chapters of the book. We also met the noun כשרון in 2:21; 4:4 and 5:10, where it seems to bear the meaning 'success' or 'skill'. The verb כשר occurs again in 11:6, where it also appears to mean 'succeed'. The word in 10:10 is probably the hiphil infinitive<sup>22</sup>, which would give a reading something like, 'the advantage of succeeding (or being skilful) is wisdom'; or 'for wisdom to succeed (or be skilful) is an advantage'. However, in rabbinic usage כשר came to mean 'prepare, make fit', and חכמה is sometimes used in the Hebrew Bible to designate technical skill<sup>23</sup>. Thus the phrase could also mean, 'it is an advantage to prepare one's skill, or technical ability'. This would fit the immediate context of the verse well, but means using both חכמה and כשר with different senses to what they mean in the rest of Qohelet - although this would not be the only such case in the book. Fox (1989:268) further compli-

<sup>22</sup>*Ketibh* הכשיר, infinitive construct; *qere* הכשר, infinitive absolute. Cf Schoors (1992:37-8).

<sup>23</sup>See, e.g., Exod 28:3; 31:3; 35:10,25; 36:8; Jer 10:9; Ezek 27:8; Ps 107:27.

cates matters by suggesting that ‘the best expedient is to point *hakkassir*’ and render ‘the skilled man’. He goes on to explain, “The advantage of the skilled man is wisdom” means that wisdom (here in the sense of technical skill) gives the skilled man an advantage over the one who substitutes force for preparedness and good sense.’

The uncertainty over how these three words should be understood can be clearly seen if we compare some of the translations given:

- But the advantage of wisdom is to give success (Barton, 1912:169)<sup>24</sup>
- and the advantage of skill is wisdom (Crenshaw, 1988:168)
- but the advantage of the skilled man is wisdom (Fox, 1989:267)
- but it is an advantage to prepare one’s skill in advance (Gordis, 1968:193)
- yitron* (will be) the reward/success of wisdom (Ogden, 1987:171)
- But the development of skill is an advantage (Whitley, 1979:86)
- but wisdom helps one succeed (RSV)
- the wise man has a better chance of success (NEB)
- the skilled worker has a better chance of success (REB)
- but skill will bring success (NIV)

Not only, then, do these three words intrude in the middle of an otherwise balanced pair of proverbs, it is also far from obvious how they should be read. It has something to do with advantage, success and wisdom, but it is not clear what exactly the relationship between these three is.

15.1.5 10:14b-15

V.14b is part of the thread of verses which assert human inability to know the future, and is particularly similar to 8:7,

איננו ידע	מה-שיהיה כי כאשר יהיה	מי יגיד לו	8:7
לא- ידע האדם	מה-שיהיה ואשר יהיה מאחריו	מי יגיד לו	10:14

The main feature that is absent from 8:7 is the word *אחריו* which, however, is used in 3:22 and 6:12. A comparison of 6:12 and 10:14 shows that the question at the beginning of 6:12 moves to the end in 10:14, and is replaced by the statement, *לא-ידע האדם*:

מי-יגיד לאדם מה-	יהיה אחריו	6:12
לא-ידע האדם מה שיהיה ואשר	יהיה מאחריו מי יגיד לו	10:14

את-זה לעמת-זה עשה האלהים על-דברת שלא ימצא האדם אחריו מאומה, 7:14, which displays similar sentiments; and 9:3 specifically relates what happens to the living

<sup>24</sup>Frendo (1981) supports Barton’s translation, but rather than emending the text as Barton does, he proposes that it is an example of ‘the Broken Construct Chain’ as described by Freedman in ‘The Broken Construct Chain’, *Bib* 53 (1972), 534-6.



‘afterwards’, ואחריו אל-המתים, וגם לב בני-האדם מלא-רע והוללות בלבבם בחייהם ואחריו אל-המתים. There is probably a play on the words אחרית and אחריו in 10:13,14.

V.15 picks up the expression לא-ידע from v.14 and applies it specifically to ‘fools’. However, there are two obvious problems with this verse: the disagreement between the usual gender of the subject and the verb, and that between the pronominal suffix and its apparent antecedent<sup>25</sup>. תיגענו is a feminine verb, but the subject, עמל, is always masculine elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. However, despite Whitley’s (1979:87) assertion that עמל ‘is masculine elsewhere in the book’, there seems to be no definite indication elsewhere in Qohelet of its gender. The demonstrative זה in 2:10 seems to refer to the situation of finding pleasure in one’s work, rather than specifically to work itself: לבי שמח מכל-עמלי וזה-היה חלקי מכל-עמלי. In fact, it is possible that the היא in 3:13 might refer to עמל, in which case its gender in this verse would also be feminine, but again this probably refers to the situation in general rather than work in particular, וגם כל-האדם שיאכל ושתה וראה טוב בכל-עמלו מתת אלהים היא. The same applies in 5:18 where both the feminine demonstrative, זאת, and the feminine pronoun, היא, occur, ולשמח בעמלו זה מתת אלהים היא. If in these verses it is the situation in general which is being described, we might have expected the masculine demonstrative and pronoun to be used, which is more usual.

There are two further points that should be made in this regard. Firstly, the author seems on other occasions to be careless concerning agreement between subject and verb. And secondly, there are other instances in the Hebrew Bible where what appears to be a masculine plural subject takes a verb whose preformative element is *taw*<sup>26</sup>, as well as other examples of a word usually regarded as masculine taking a feminine verb or adjective<sup>27</sup>. Thus, even if עמל is masculine in Qohelet, the feminine prefix on the verb is not entirely without precedent.

As regards the disagreement between subject and pronominal suffix, this is readily overcome if the punctuation of the MT is ignored. The verse may then be read, ‘the work of fools wearies him who does not know how to go to a city.’ If this reading is correct, there is a ready interpretation of the verse that explains the apparently obscure second half. If the phrase עמל הכסילים refers back to the incessant chattering of the fool in the previous verses, the

<sup>25</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:74,80-5,158).

<sup>26</sup>E.g., תקונו in Ezek 37:7, and תחשבני in Job 19:15.

<sup>27</sup>E.g., אל-תחד כברי in Gen 49:6, and המון רבה in Job 31:34.

situation envisaged may be that of a stranger who seeks advice regarding the way to a particular city: however, in response, the fool takes the opportunity to show off his/her knowledge (thus actually displaying his/her ignorance!), and in the process succeeds only in wearying the stranger. This would tie in with the other two occurrences of the root יגע: in 1:8 in particular, כל-הדברים יגעים; but also the implications of 12:9-12, which culminates in the statement in v.12, עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ ולהג הרבה יגעת בשר, warning against a proliferation of written words. It might also explain 10:3, כשהסכל הלך לבו חסר ואמר לכל סכל הוא, <sup>28</sup>וגם-בדרך כשהסכל הלך לבו חסר ואמר לכל סכל הוא. Moreover, it would help link this verse with the preceding verses which clearly focus on speech.

One further observation we might offer in support of the above reading, is the fact that a disjunctive accent often appears in Qohelet directly before אשר when it means 'who' or 'which' and refers to a subject preceding the accent. Elsewhere, however, this accent is a *zaqeph* rather than an *athnah*.

Alternatively, the singular suffix on the verb may be considered as 'distributive', where, according to Ges<sup>K</sup> (145,5)<sup>29</sup>, 'the plural of persons (especially in the participle) is ... construed with the singular of the predicate, when instead of the whole class of individuals, each severally is to be represented as affected by the statement.' Throughout Qohelet האדם is used to indicate 'all people', and we also find החכם representing 'all wise people', and הכסיל/הסכל standing for 'all fools', so it may be that הכסילים here stands for 'each one of these fools'. Each of these individuals could then be the subject of the singular לא-ידע in the second half of the verse.

Both these readings are possible as the text stands. But if it is left as punctuated, it is far from clear what is intended by the disagreement between the subject and the verb, and the suffix and its antecedent. Again it may have been designed to be ambiguous and to raise questions in the reader's mind.

However, Fox (1989:269) says of the first half of the verse, 'the text is *undoubtedly* corrupt' [our emphasis]<sup>30</sup>. He proposes עמל הכסיל מיגענו for MT's עמל הכסילים תיגענו, 'We

<sup>28</sup>Fox (1989:269), however, suggests that 10:15 originally belonged after v.3:

Combined, the two verses say: even when just walking on the road the fool reveals to everyone that he is stupid (v.3), for he wearies himself by getting lost on the way to town.

<sup>29</sup>He cites as 'undoubted examples of this *distributive* singular' Gen 27:29; Exod 31:14; Lev 17:14; 19:8.

<sup>30</sup>Cf Barton (1912:178); Crenshaw (1988:175); Whitley (1979:88).



may surmise that the second *yod* of MT *hksylm* was added after the *mem* was incorrectly joined to *hksyl*. The *taw* is probably a dittograph of the *mem* of *myg'nw* ... Alternatively, the intrusive *t-* may be a near dittograph of the following *y-*.<sup>31</sup> Crenshaw (1988:175) and Whitley (1979:88), on the other hand, both suggest that (in Whitley's words), 'הכסיל' could be construed as a combination of הכסיל with the old genitive case-ending י, with the enclitic מ'. But both approaches are unnecessary if the MT can be explained as it stands, particularly when its ambiguity is so typical a characteristic of Qohelet.

If the text of the first half is emended, or the singular suffix is read as distributive, we are then left to explain the second half of the verse. Most commentators take it as an idiom<sup>31</sup>, the precise sense of which is now lost to us, but which presumably indicates extreme stupidity. This would make good sense of the verse, and would accord with the sentiments of 10:3, and also the similarly constructed clause of at the end of 4:13, אשר לא-ידע להזהר עוד.

#### 15.1.6 10:16-20

In the same way that the last three words of v.10 disrupt the balance between vv.10,11, so also the last three words of v.17 disrupt the balance between the vv.16,17:

<u>ויתרון הכשיר חכמה</u>	אם-פה הברזל והוא לא-פנים פלפל וחילים יגבר	v.10
	אם-ישך הנחש בלוא-להש ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון	v.11
	אי-לך ארץ שמלכך נער ושריך בבקר יאכלו	v.16
<u>בגבורה ולא בשתי</u>	אשריך ארץ שמלכך בן-חורים ושריך בעת יאכלו	v.17

If these three words are left aside for the moment, vv.16,17 are also, like v.10,11, of identical length in terms of number of words, though not in this instance in terms of number of letters. These similarities serve to draw attention to the words which are different in the two verses, so that

אי-לך נער בבקר

are contrasted to

אשריך בן-חורים בעת

אי-לך and אשריך are obvious contrasts. אי occurs only v.16 and probably in 4:10 in Qohelet. As in 4:10, the word here is probably the spelling found also in the Mishna of the interjection 'woe!' which appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as אוי (e.g., Isa 6:5), and

<sup>31</sup>Cf, e.g., Barton (1912:174); Crenshaw (1988:175); Fox (1989:269); Gordis (1968:324); etc.

sometimes as **הי** (e.g., Ezek 2:10)<sup>32</sup>. **אשריך**, which occurs only here in this book, does occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, although only in this verse is it pointed with a *sere*. This may be because it is an interjection derived from the common form **אשרי**<sup>33</sup>.

The contrast between **בבקר** and **בעת** is not quite so obvious. However, the morning would certainly seem to be an inappropriate time for feasting, and it may be recalled that **עת** appears several times in Qohelet to indicate the *appropriate* time for doing something (particularly in the 'time-poem', but also, for example, in the question **למה תמות בלא עתך** in 7:17). Thus the contrast is probably between feasting at an appropriate or at an inappropriate time. The three words added to v.17 serve to explain the appropriateness of the time, and this may be their specific function: they may have been added to emphasise the need to feast at the *right* time.

The contrast between **נער** and **בן-חורים** is even less obvious. The word **חורים** occurs only here in Qohelet, but elsewhere it means 'nobles'<sup>34</sup>. The usual meaning for **נער** is 'boy, lad, youth', but this does not seem to provide much of a contrast to **בן-חורים**. The word does not occur elsewhere in the book, **ילד** being used to convey this meaning. However, **נער** can also bear the sense of 'personal attendant, servant', so it may be this meaning that is intended here. In 5:11 **עבד** is used in contrast to **עשיר**, and in 10:7 **עבדים** is used in contrast to **שרים**. Thus it may be that here again there are different terms used to convey the same thing,

5:11	<b>עבד</b>	<b>עשיר</b>
10:7	<b>עבדים</b>	<b>שרים</b>
10:16,17	<b>נער</b>	<b>בן-חורים</b>

In this case, 10:16 is similar to 10:7 in depicting inappropriate circumstances, while 10:17 portrays how things ought to be. The implication may also be that it is foolish to allow the first, and wise to attain the second.

As we noted above, v.19 stands out sharply from the verses either side of it because of its structure and the sentiments it expresses - which seem to tie in with the verses issuing the 'call to enjoyment'. It is not at all clear whether these sentiments are presented in an approving or a disapproving manner: of itself the verse seems quite neutral, so that the way it is interpreted will probably depend on how the reader understands it to fit into its context.

<sup>32</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:149).

<sup>33</sup>E.g., 1 Kgs 10:8; Ps 119:1; Prov 20:7; etc.

<sup>34</sup>**חור** 'noble', occurs only 13 times in the Hebrew Bible: 1 Kgs 21:8,11; Isa 34:12; Jer 27:20; 39:6; Neh 2:16; 4:8,13; 5:7; 6:17; 7:5; 13:17; Qoh 10:17. **בן-חורים** is used only here.



In 2:2 'laughter' and 'pleasure' are disdained, **לשחוק אמרתי מהולל ולשמחה מה-זה עשה**, and in the following verses 'wine' (2:3), 'money' (2:8), and 'pleasure' (2:10) all rank among those things which fail to bring satisfaction. Along similar lines, 'laughter' rates poorly in 7:4, **טוב כעס משחק כי-ברע פנים ייטב לב**, and in the following verse it is asserted that it is fools whose hearts are in **בית שמחה**, then in 7:6 the 'laughter of fools' is compared to the crackling of burning thorns. 9:11 observes that **לא לחכמים לחם**, and in 5:9 money comes under attack, **אהב כסף לא-ישבע כסף**. However, in 7:12 there seems to be an implicit approval of the value of money for 'protection' in the phrase **בצל החכמה בצל הסף**, and in 3:4 we are told that **עת לשחוק**. Moreover, the 'call to enjoyment' verses, seem very positively to extol the value of 'eating' and 'drinking' and finding 'pleasure' in what one does. It seems, then, that the author displays a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards these things, which makes interpretation of this verse all the more difficult.

We might render the first clause, 'for laughter they prepare food.' It is unclear, however, who 'they' are. It could be, as Gordis (1968:328) argues<sup>35</sup>, that the plural is impersonal and should be rendered 'one'. If this is the case, the verse may be, as Fox (1989:272) suggests, 'an incidental remark describing the good fortune of the wealthy.' However, because it is a plural, the reader may think back to the plural noun **שריץ** in vv.16,17. The use of the roots **אכל** and **שתה** forms another link between the verses. Moreover, the mention of food used for laughter, and wine used for pleasure, seems to contrast with the observation that the princes in v.17, who feasted at the proper time, ate for **גבורה**, and *not* for **שתי**. This may indicate that v.19 is to be associated with the behaviour of the princes in v.16, in which case it seems to be designed to be read with disapproval. Alternatively, v.18 may further develop the consequences of v.16, while v.19 further develops the consequences of v.17: when the princes eat and drink at the proper time it brings pleasure, and the appropriate people to rule are those with money (that is **בן-חורים**), because it 'answers everything.' However, the final clause of v.17 does not fit this reading well.

**כסף**, in the final clause, is emphasised by the addition to it of the article while the previous nouns, **לחם** and **יין** were indefinite<sup>36</sup>. This may suggest that 'money' is the particular

<sup>35</sup>Cf Crenshaw (1988:176); Ogden (1987:179).

<sup>36</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:166-9) who offers the following examples of nouns which occur in a series where one noun has the article while another has not: 2:8; 3:17; 4:4; 4:9-12; 7:25; 10:19,20; 12:1,4,6.

focus of the verse. But what precisely is said about money is far from clear - it largely depends on how the verb 'ענה is understood. The use of this verb recalls the word ענין which occurs fairly often in chs.1-5 (1:13; 2:23,26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:2,13) then only once more in 8:16. There are also verbs which appear to be from the same root in 1:13; 3:10 and 5:19 (and the noun עני in 6:8 may also be from the same root). In the case of all these words, the root seems to be either 'be occupied, busy' or 'be afflicted'. It may be that some ambiguity is intended. The same could apply here, in which case the clause might be rendered, 'money occupies everyone'<sup>37</sup>, or 'money also afflicts everyone'. In this way it is similar to the verb in 5:19 which is used in connection with שמחה, and follows a verse issuing the 'call to enjoyment', כי לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו. However, it could be that the verb in 5:19 is from another root 'to answer', which, on the basis of Gen 41:16 and Hos 2:23-24 might be rendered 'provide' (although this meaning is not certain<sup>38</sup>). The same could apply here, and this would also make sense of the clause, 'money provides everything'<sup>39</sup>. All that can be said with any certainty is that the precise implications of this final clause are unclear, and it may be read *either* positively or negatively<sup>40</sup>. If the verse specifically picks up on the 'call to enjoyment' verses, it may have a considerable impact on the way those verses are understood. 9:7-9 seems quite clearly to pick up on those verses, and we noted above that while God's 'approval' is mentioned in v.7, God is notably absent from v.9. In 10:19 the themes of eating and drinking are picked up, but no mention is made of God whatsoever - in this verse it is money that provides all the answers.

עשיר and מלך are used as parallel terms in 10:20, and this may establish a further link between vv.16,17 and v.20. Three different words have been used for 'ruler/king' in this section: מושל (9:17; 10:4); שליט (10:5); and מלך (10:16,17,20).

A comparison between 10:20 and 7:21,22 reveals that not only does Qohelet examine certain issues very thoroughly, but (s)he also views them from more than one perspective. 7:21,22 could be read as addressing precisely the same issue as 10:20, but from the perspective of the king rather than one of his subjects as seems to be the case here:

<sup>37</sup>Cf Fox (1989:271), who takes this line.

<sup>38</sup>Whybray (1989:157) observes, 'This precise meaning of *'anah*, normally "to answer", is not found elsewhere, but is probably an extension of the notion of answering a request or demand (cf Isa 30:19; Ps 118:5).'

<sup>39</sup>Cf Salters (1977:425).

<sup>40</sup>Thus Ogden (1987:179) observes, 'Its many possible translations make precision difficult, leading to a division among commentators as to whether it speaks of something negative or positive.'



גם לכל-הדברים אשר ידברו אל-תתן לבך אשר לא-תשמע את-עבדך מקללך 7:21,22  
כי גם-פעמים רבות ידע לבך אשר גם-את פללת אחרים

גם במדעך מלך אל-תקלל ובחדרי משכבך אל-תקלל עשיר 10:20  
כי עוף השמים יוליך את-הקול ובעל הכנפים יגיד דבר

### 15.1.7 11:1-6

We noted earlier that vv.1,2 form another pair of parallel verses, the parallelism drawing particular attention to the differences between the second halves of the two verses. The most obvious difference is that the second half of v.2 is much longer. This is heightened by the fact that there are only three accented units in v.1, **כי-ברב**, **הימים** and **תמצאנו**, while there are six in v.2, **כי**, **לא**, **תדע**, **מה-יהיה**, **רעה** and **על-הארץ**. Moreover, the tone of v.1 is much smoother - partly because of the length of the accented units, and partly because of the variety of vowel sounds, while the short words **כי**, **לא**, **תדע** and **רעה**, and the repeated 'a'-sound in **רעה** and **על-הארץ** make v.2 more staccato. In v.1 emphasis is placed on the positive verb, **תמצאנו**, by its position at the end of the verse, but the negative verb, **לא תדע**, appears at the start of the second half of v.2. This negative note is sounded also by the word **רעה**, which does not occur in the other verses that assert human inability to know the future.

In light of these considerations, it would appear that whatever the precise meaning of these verses, the positive aspect of the second half of v.1, and the negative tone of the second half of v.2 are important. It may also be that the focus is especially on what one *can* find and what one *cannot* know. This latter is certainly specifically mentioned in vv.5,6, and may also underlie vv.3,4. Perhaps the verses are a call to make the most of the opportunities life presents, despite uncertainty about how things will develop in the future, which is very much in line with the 'call to enjoyment' verses. However, it is not at all easy to determine what relevance these two verses have in their context. There are basically two main lines of interpretation: either they are a call to generosity such that one should distribute some of his or her own possessions to others<sup>41</sup>, or they refer to the advantages and risks of maritime trade<sup>42</sup>. In the former case, the reference would seem to be to liberality with one's food in v.1, and distribution, perhaps of this food, among a number of people in v.2. In the latter case, v.1 would

<sup>41</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:181); Fox (1988:274).

<sup>42</sup>See, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:178); Gordis (1968:330); Loader (1986:126); Whybray (1989:158).

recommend entrusting one's goods to merchant ships in view of the good return they are likely to bring, while v.2 advises the precautionary step of dividing the cargo among several ships in case one or more should meet with some calamity en route. The verses may thus be understood either as a recommendation of philanthropy, or as advice regarding one's own advancement in business matters. However, even if the first reading is followed, the motive may still be self-interest, for the second half of v.1 could be interpreted to mean that one should be generous because of the future returns (s)he will receive, while the second half of v.2 might mean that generosity is motivated out of a concern to cover oneself in case hard times come when the favour will be returned. Which reading is adopted will depend largely on how the following verses are understood: and they also could be read in different ways. Most commentators feel it necessary to choose one or other interpretation, but this may be another example of deliberate ambiguity.

We noted above the chiasmic structure of the second half of 11:3, which draws attention to the last two words, **שם יהוא**,

ואם-יפול עץ בדרום ואם בצפון מקום שיפול העץ שם יהוא

This means that the uncertainty over the precise meaning of the final word, **יהוא**, is of particular importance, and may suggest, in view of other anomalies and ambiguities in the book, that the use of a word which seems not to make sense as it stands may be original rather than a copyist's error. There seem to be four ways in which the word might be understood:

- 1) It could be the third person masculine singular pronoun with a *yodh* mistakenly added<sup>43</sup>. This would be similar to the clause in 1:5, **ואל-מקומו שואף זורח הוא שם**, and it would also display an abruptness similar to the end of 3:13: **מתת אלהים היא**.
- 2) It could be from the rare verb **הוה**, found in Qoh 2:20, and only three times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 27:29; Isa 16:4; Neh 6:6)<sup>44</sup>. This verb has a meaning similar to the much more common **היה**, but in its other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible seems to be restricted more to the sense 'to become' which is not appropriate in 11:3.
- 3) The word may then be from the verb **היה**, in which case it would need to be repointed and the consonants changed to give **יהיה**. While this would make good sense in the context, it

<sup>43</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:193).

<sup>44</sup>See Whitley (1979:93).



requires too many emendations to make it a likely possibility. Some commentators<sup>45</sup> contend that יהוא may be a conflation of the pronoun הוא and the verb יהיה, which seems a better option.

4) It may be from an Aramaic root הוא which has a similar meaning to יהיה, and also means 'to fall'<sup>46</sup>. The verb occurs in Job 37:6, מטר וגשם נטרות עזו, which bears parallels to Qoh 11:3 that may well suggest that the word here is connected to that verb. The sense of 'falling' is highly appropriate to Qoh 11:3 where the verb נפל is used twice, and perhaps the word is designed to relate *both* to the pronoun and to this verb. The meaning is little affected, whichever of the above options is followed, and it may have intentionally been written in its unusual form to draw attention to it<sup>47</sup>.

Although the surface meaning of v.4 seems to be reasonably clear, its purpose in the context is again ambiguous. It may be an exhortation to take a risk when it comes to farming practices, because if one waits for the ideal conditions he or she may wait forever. In this way it would be very much in line with the commercial interpretation of vv.1,2, and v.3 may be understood to mean that things happen at a certain time and in a particular way and there is not much that can be done about it except to make the most of what the opportunity affords. Alternatively, it may be a commendation of those who are careful to observe the weather conditions and who sow and reap at the *appropriate* time. V.3 may then be understood to indicate that if one observes carefully (s)he will discern something of how nature operates. Vv.1,2 might also refer to care with one's possessions - if you distribute your wealth carefully when you have it, when bad times come others may do likewise and see you through: we might say in terms typical of the time-poem in ch.3, there is a time to give to others and a time to receive from them. Both interpretations are possible, and again the reading of this verse is likely to be determined by the reader's understanding of the section as a whole. The comments of Loader and Ogden might be noted in this regard: Loader (1986:127) writes, 'this positive interpretation, which would be characteristic for wisdom in general, is negated by the remainder of the poem'; while Ogden (1987:187) contends that the view 'that here we have to

<sup>45</sup>See, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:179); Gordis (1968:331); Ogden (1987:187); Whybray (1989:159).

<sup>46</sup>See Whitley (1979:93).

<sup>47</sup>יהוא is one of the words which leads Schoors (1992:221) to the conclusion, 'The language of Qoh is definitely late in the development of BH and belongs to what scholars recently have called Late Biblical Hebrew.'

do with lost opportunities, would be acceptable as a possible meaning for the verse if it were not in this present context.' Loader (1986:127) goes on to say, 'The rain either comes or it does not come; it is not something man can do anything about - and he does not even know anything about it, for it lies within the domain of God's works.' By contrast, Ogden (1987:188) maintains,

Qoheleth is speaking to a principle enunciated in ch.3, that there are appropriate (and inappropriate) times for all activities... Observing natural phenomena, as vv.3 and 4 indicate, allows us a glimpse into the divine ordering of the world, to discover information which we might apply to add meaning to life.

The main problem in v.5 is in determining whether the first half of the verse refers to two separate things or just to one. If the text is read with the MT, the former is more likely. **כַּאֲשֶׁר** at the beginning of the verse, and the *kaph* in **כְּעֲצָמִים**, would mean something like: 'just as ... similarly': '*just as* you do not know what is the path of the wind/breath/spirit, *similarly* with the bones in the womb of the pregnant woman.' The implication seems to be that just as one does not understand how the wind/breath/spirit operates, similarly one does not understand how the bones of a foetus come together. If this first reading is followed, the second half of the verse could be rendered, 'thus you may not know the deeds of God who makes both [of these things].' It may be that **רוּחַ** is intentionally ambiguous: in view of its use in v.4, the meaning 'wind' seems most obvious, but it could also be read as the 'life-breath' which comes to a baby when it is born. If it is understood in the former sense, the verse might be interpreted in this way:

Just as you cannot figure out the wind (and so cannot be sure when to sow), so also the formation of a baby in the womb is beyond your comprehension: thus you do know the deeds of God who makes both of these things.

If it is understood in the latter sense, the verse might be read:

Just as you cannot figure out how the spirit comes to a baby, so also it is beyond your comprehension how the bones knit together in the womb: thus you do not know the deeds of God who makes both these things.

However, many commentators<sup>48</sup> recommend following a number of manuscripts and emend **כְּעֲצָמִים** to **בְּעֲצָמִים**. In this way a reading similar to the last one mentioned above is achieved, but with only one example offered to illustrate human lack of knowledge:

Just as you do not know how it is the life-breath comes into the bones in the womb of a pregnant woman, so also you do not know the deeds of God who does everything.

<sup>48</sup>See, e.g., Fox (1989:276); Gordis (1968:332); Ogden (1987:188).



Whybray (1989a:160) argues that, 'Syntactically the [last] of these interpretations presents fewer difficulties'; it also seems to give a more straightforward reading, and gives a better balance between the two halves of the verse because it compares one thing that is not known against another thing that is not known:

כֹּאשֶׁר אֵינֶךָ יוֹדֵעַ מֶה-דֶּרֶךְ הַרוּחַ בַּעֲצָמִים בְּבֶטֶן הַמְּלָאָה  
כִּכָּה לֹא תִדְעַתְּ אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת-הַכֹּל

On the other hand, the first reading has the distinct advantage that it does not require emendation of the text, and it also ties in more closely with the theme of the preceding verse. In addition, it displays the kind of ambiguity over the meaning of the word רוּחַ which is typical of Qohelet. Moreover, it is a dangerous principle, particularly in this book, to emend the text on the basis that it seems to provide a more straightforward reading.

The sentiments of the last part of v.5 are also expressed in 3:11 and 8:17, only in these two verses the verb מִצָּא is used:

	הָאֱלֹהִים	הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה	אֶת-	לֹא-יִמְצָא הָאָדָם	3:11
8:17	רָאִיתִי	אֶת-כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂה	הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי לֹא	יֻכַּל הָאָדָם לִמְצוֹא	
11:5	הָאֱלֹהִים	מַעֲשֵׂה	אֶת-	לֹא-תִדְעַתְּ	

Typical of Qohelet, while these all say basically the same thing, they are expressed in three different ways.

Commentators disagree about the meaning of ולערב ... בבקר in v.6. The most obvious reading would seem to be 'in the morning and to the evening', suggesting a complete day's work<sup>49</sup>. However, the second half of the verse seems, by use of the phrase הַזֶּה אוֹ-זֶה and the word שְׁנֵיהֶם, to refer to two distinct times<sup>50</sup>, suggesting rather a reading 'in the morning and in the evening'. In support of this understanding of the verse, we might note that לבקר in Ps 30:6 may best be rendered as 'in the morning', and likewise with לערב in 1 Chr 23:30 which may mean 'in the evening'. Alternatively, it may be as Fox (1989:276) suggests<sup>51</sup>, that the phrase is designed as a merismus meaning 'at all times'.

<sup>49</sup>See, e.g., Eaton (1983:143); Whybray (1979:93).

<sup>50</sup>See, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:181); Fox (1989:276).

<sup>51</sup>See also Eaton (1983:143), who suggests that the reference is 'not to two periods of sowing', but agrees that "from morning to evening" is an idiom of completeness'.

זרע and אל-תנח express the same idea antithetically: זרע is a positive exhortation to action, אל-תנח is a negative exhortation not to refrain from action. זרע recalls v.4, and the sentiments of v.6 may help the reader to decide how that verse should be understood. If v.6 calls for continuous sowing, v.4 may be read as a condemnation of the one who is over-cautious in sowing. However, if it refers to two different times for sowing, it may indicate that one should watch the weather and sow at what seems a propitious moment - but rather than resting on one's laurels, a second sowing should take place at another time to increase the chances of success. In fact, the ambiguity is maintained by v.6.

זרע may also recall v.5. Reference is made in v.5 to the foetus in a pregnant woman's womb, and the author may be playing on the dual sense of this word זרע which can refer either to the seed of a plant, or human offspring<sup>52</sup>. This has led some commentators<sup>53</sup> to see the first part of v.6 as an allusion to producing children, and it is possible that this sense is included in the meaning of the verse.

How, then, does v.6 contribute to the meaning of 11:1-6? It seems clearly to indicate the limitations of human knowledge thus continuing the theme of the previous verse and v.2, and whichever way it is understood, whether advising continuous action to cover all options, or a carefully planned second burst of activity, it appears to advise that one take precautions to cover the possible consequences of his or her ignorance.

## 15.2 Conclusions

Again in this section we have noted a number of points of ambiguity. We observed, for example, that 9:12 could be read in three ways; that the word גדול in 9:13-16 is used in different ways, as is נוח in 9:17-10:4 (and אל-תנח in 10:4 is used in a different way to אל-תנח in 7:18 and 11:6); כסל and סכל seem to be used interchangeably in 9:17-10:4, and חטא might be used with much the same meaning; רבים, the middle word in the middle verse of 10:5-7, could be read either with what precedes it or with what comes after; 10:10 is an extremely difficult verse, the last three words of which, יתרון הכשיר חכמה, disrupt the structure of the passage 10:8-14a and have elicited a great variety of interpretations from the commentators; the

<sup>52</sup>And, very occasionally, animal offspring (see Gen 3:15; 7:3).

<sup>53</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:184) and the Midrash.



last part of 10:17, בגבורה ולא בשתי, similarly disrupts the balance of 10:16,17, and 10:19 seems decidedly out of place in the passage 10:16-20 where its theme and structure are quite different to the other verses; and, in addition to a number of smaller difficulties, there is considerable disagreement over the implication of 11:1-6, whether they call for philanthropy and liberality, or a careful calculation of risks so as to protect one's wealth.

In terms of the overall meaning of 9:11-11:6, it appears that there are a number of themes woven into the discussion. In 9:11-16 the author warns that our action does not always result in appropriate or expected consequences. This is applied specifically to wisdom in vv.13-16, and the theme of wise and foolish actions continues throughout ch.10, while many of the verses in this chapter also illustrate inappropriate consequences of wise or foolish action. 'Not knowing' is mentioned in 9:11,12 and again in 10:14,15, but it becomes the major theme of 11:1-6 - recalling the close connection established earlier in the book between 'wisdom' and 'knowledge'. It seems that the author advises certain courses of action in 11:1-6, but the motivation for this action seems to be 'because you do not know.' It may be that the author is recommending in 9:11-11:6 that one act as wisely as possible, given the limits of human knowledge, accepting that at times things will not work out as we expect, and trusting that God knows better than we do what is going on. On the other hand, these may be the words of a cynic who questions whether wise action ultimately brings its due reward, especially if it is not backed up by material wealth, and advises the reader to cover his/her options as best (s)he can.

## CHAPTER 16, Youth, Old Age and Death (11:7-12:8)

### 16.1 Commentary

#### 16.1.1 11:7-8

11:7 is striking because of its apparently optimistic view of life. It thus forms something of a contrast to the previous section, and this is seen among other things by the very different use to which the words טוב and -אם are put: in v.6 they envelope a question which illustrates human inability to 'know'; in v.7 they are reversed and form part of a positive affirmation of the 'goodness' and 'joyfulness' of life:

כי אינך יודע אי זה יכשר הזה או-זה ואם שניהם כאחד טובים	v.6
ומתוך האור וטוב לעינים לראות את-השמש כי אם-שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח	v.7

'Life' is indicated by the phrase, לראות את-השמש, and this is in sharp contrast with the use of the phrase תחת השמש which seems usually to be associated with bad circumstances:

אין כל-חדש תחת השמש	1:9
ראיתי את-כל-המעשים שנעשו תחת השמש והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח	1:14
והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש	2:11
ושנאתי את-החיים כי רע עלי המעשה שנעשה תחת השמש כי הכל הבל ורעות רוח	2:17
ושנאתי אני את-כל-עמלי שאני עמל תחת השמש	2:18
ומי יודע החכם יהי או סכל וישלט בכל עמל שעמלתי ושחכמתי תחת השמש גם-זה הבל	2:19
וסבותי אני ליאש את-לבי על כל-בעמל שעמלתי תחת השמש	2:20
מה-הוה לאדם בכל-עמלו וברעיון לבו שהוא עמל תחת השמש	2:22
ראיתי תחת השמש מקום המשפט שמה הרשע ומקום הצדק שמה הרשע	3:16
את-כל-העשקים אשר נעשים תחת השמש	4:1
את-המעשה הרע אשר נעשה תחת השמש	4:3
ושבתי אני ואראה הבל תחת השמש	4:7
יש רעה הולה ראיתי תחת השמש	5:12
יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש	6:1
ונתון את-לבי לכל-מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש עת אשר שלט האדם באדם לרע לו	8:9
זה רע בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש	9:3
יש רעה ראיתי תחת השמש	10:5

Two notable exceptions are 5:17 and 8:15 which both issue the 'call to enjoyment':

ולראות טובה בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש	5:17
אין-טוב לאדם תחת השמש כי אם-לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח	8:15

We should also note that the expression 'sight of the eyes' in Qohelet usually seems to be employed in a negative context:

לא-תשבע עין לראות	1:8
גם-עיניו לא-תשבע עשר	4:8
ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה ומה-כשרון לבעליה כי אם-ראית עיניו	5:10
ביום ובלילה שנה בעיניו איננו ראה	8:16

6:9 seems to be an exception, טוב מראה עינים מהלך נפש, but it may be that the end of the verse, גם-זה הבל ורעות רוח, sheds a different light on it. Moreover, much of what our author



says he 'saw' appears to be negative (see 1:14; 3:16; 4:1,4,7; 5:12; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9,10; 9:13; and 10:5,7 - but 2:24; 3:22 and 5:17, which are all 'call to enjoyment' verses, record positive observations). In light of the use of these words in negative contexts elsewhere in Qohelet, the optimism of the verse is all the more striking.

האור in 11:7 is contrasted with ימי החשך in v.8. The contrast between light and darkness is important over the next few verses, and seems to be symbolic of the contrast between the fulness of life associated with youth and the cessation of life at death. 12:2 alludes back to the use of האור and השמש in 11:7 and החשך in 11.8, but while 11:7 uses light to symbolise life, 12:2 refers to 'darkening' of that light: עד אשר לא-החשך השמש והאור. Then in contrast to 'the eyes that see the sun' in 11:7, 12:3 seems to describe the dimming of one's sight, וחשכו הראות בארבות.

The contrast between light and darkness occurs elsewhere in 2:13,14 where wisdom and folly are compared to light and dark, יש יתרון לחכמה מן הסכלות כיתרון האור מן-החשך. But in 6:4-5, 'not seeing the sun' and being 'in darkness' both indicate that there is not life, כי-בהבל בא ובחשך ילך ובחשך שמו יכסה גם-שמש לא-ראה ולא ידע.

The two verbs שמח and זכר are used together only in 11:8 and 5:19. 5:19 also uses כי; it has a temporal reference; it uses the word הרבה, though it is negated by לא; it contains a word from the root חיה; and its subject is האדם (from the previous verse). The first half of 5:19 ties in most closely with the second part of 11:8<sup>1</sup>:

כי לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו	5:19
ויזכר את-ימי החשך כי-הרבה יהיו	11:8

The similarity becomes still clearer if we reverse the clauses in 5:19 thus:

יזכר את-ימי חייו [כי לא הרבה]	5:19
ויזכר את-ימי החשך כי- הרבה יהיו	11:8

Comparing the verses in this way suggests that את-ימי חייו and את-ימי החשך are antithetical phrases, leading to the conclusion that the latter indicates the 'days of death'. This conforms

<sup>1</sup>Ogden makes much of the similarity between 5:17-19 and 11:7-12:8. He writes (1984:37),

If we consider the relationship between 5:18-19 and the other calls to enjoyment ... we are better able to plot the significance of this closing pericope because it then can be seen to have an essential connection with all the preceding 'en tob clauses (2:24; 3:12,22; 5:17; 8:15), which, as I have shown, is the medium for conveying Qoheleth's most fundamental advice in light of man's inability to discover any ultimate 'advantage' in this life. It should not, therefore, surprise us to discover that the closing advice of the entire work is that which Qoheleth has been offering throughout.

with common biblical imagery<sup>2</sup>, and with the use of האור in the previous verse. It should be noted that the ‘days of life’ are specifically referred to six times in Qohelet, with some variation in the expression, three of them describing the ‘few’ days of life, but the last one describing ‘all’ the days of life,

מספר ימי חייהם	2:3
מספר ימי-חיו	5:17
ימי חייו	5:19
מספר ימי-חיי	6:12
ימי חייו	8:15
כל- ימי חיי	9:9

There is great irony in the assertion that the days of life will be forgotten, but the ‘days of darkness’ will be remembered.

Secondly, the parallel between חיה and חשך is also drawn out in 11:8, because these words occur at the centre of each of the two sections of the verse, the same number of letters occurring either side:

כי אם-שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח  
ויזכר את-ימי החשך כי הרבה יהיו

This adds support to the argument that it is life and death which are referred to here.

The final phrase of 11:8 is something of an enigma, and the tone of the verse depends to a large extent on how it is understood. The first question is whether כל-שבא refers specifically to what happens in the ‘days of darkness’, or to everything that is to come. The former is more likely in the context because כל would then form a contrast with בכלם earlier in the verse. Moreover, the effect of the final clause in 11:10 would be greater if the phrase here is read to mean ‘all that is to come in the days of darkness is *hebel*’: vv.7-10 seem to laud life and youthfulness in contrast to the coming days of darkness - but then in 11:10b we are told that youth, too, is *hebel*. This is supported by the parallel between כל-שבא הבל in 11:8 and the phrase ימי הרעה יבאו in 12:1; and by the clause, הימים הבאים הכל נשכח, in 2:16 which also relates to death.

The second question relates to the meaning of הבל. This is one of the major problems of the entire book, and the tone of much of the book may be radically changed by rendering this word in different ways. The reader is left to decide whether the word bears connotations of meaninglessness or futility, or whether it conveys something more like ephemerality or

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., 1 Sam 2:9; Job 10:21; 17:13; 18:18; Ps 88:13; Prov 20:20.



enigma. Crenshaw, for example (1988:183) argues that ‘the final remark registers unrelieved pessimism: everything that the future holds in Sheol is utterly absurd’; and Fox (1989:278) agrees when he maintains that ‘death is absurd and guarantees life’s absurdity.’ Whybray (1989a:161), however, contends that ‘Qoheleth’s intention here is *not* to introduce a note of gloom to negate or qualify the cheerful note struck in v.7’ [our emphasis]; and Ogden (1987:195) interprets the word in this way, ‘We may know the fact that death is a perpetual state, but what happens at that point and beyond ... is too much for our limited comprehension.’ Twice the ‘days of life’ are described as הבל, and twice ‘days’ are described in this way; by contrast, on three occasions the days of life are described as ‘given by God’, and in 9:9 the two come together:

	ימי חייהם	מספר	2:3
אשר-נתן-לו האלהים	ימי-חיו	מספר	5:17
	ימי חייו		5:19
הבלו	ימי-חיי	מספר	6:12
הבלי	ימי	ב-	7:15
אשר-נתן-לו האלהים	ימי חייו		8:15
אשר נתן-לך	ימי חיי	כל-	9:9
הבלך	ימי	כל-	9:9

16.1.2 11:9-12:1a

There are two particularly striking features of v.9 which should be noted: firstly, the abundant use of the second person singular pronominal ending, and secondly, the different words used to indicate ‘youth’. We have already observed that the second person is used frequently at the end of chs.10,11, and this use comes to a head in v.9 where the pronominal ending occurs seven times: בילדותיך, ויטיבך, לבך, בחורותך, לבך, עיניך and יביאך. Six of these appear in the first half of the verse, so that half of the twelve words end with the suffix, and a further two words, בהלך and בדרכי, have *kaph* in the final syllable. In addition, there are three imperatives, שמח, והלך and ודע, which give the verse much more force than the jussives (or imperfect verbs) of the previous verse. The clear impression is that the author here is very directly addressing his readers, and this carries over into 12:1-7<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Fox (1988:63) notes,  
For whom are they mourning so intensely? The answer is inevitable ... they mourn for *you*, you to whom Qohelet addressed his advice and warnings; the ‘you’ of v.1. It is *your* fate that appalls them, for this, Qohelet says, is what awaits *you*. [His emphasis].

The words **בחור** and **בחורות** both come from the root **בחר**, 'choose'. **בחור** is a commonly used word in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning 'young person', but it may be that the notion of being chosen, or privileged, is also alluded to here. This would support Crenshaw's reading of **טוב לפני האלהים** and **חוטא** as the 'fortunate' and 'unfortunate', and ties in with the comparison between the one whom **לאכל ממנו** in 5:18, with the one whom **לא-ישליטנו האלהים לאכל ממנו** in 6:2. The word **בחורות** occurs only here and in 12:1 in the Hebrew Bible. In Num 11:28 **בחורים** is used for the abstract notion of 'youth', and the plural noun **בחורים**, 'youths', occurs often. The word **ילדות** is also rare in the Hebrew Bible, occurring only here and in the next verse in Qohelet, and elsewhere only in Ps 110:3. According to its etymology it ought perhaps to mean 'childhood', but it is probably used here as a synonym for **בחורות**. And in v.10 a third word is used for 'youth', **שחרות**. This word occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, and its etymology is unclear. It may be from the root **שחר** from which the word for dawn comes, hence 'dawn of life' = 'childhood'; or it may from from another root **שחר** from which the word for 'black' comes, hence 'time of black hair' = 'youth'.

The first half of v.9 consists of two clauses that may be synonymous, and a third that expresses similar sentiments. These increase by one word each time:

שמח בחור בילדותיך  
ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותך  
והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך

If **ויטיבך** is read as a jussive, the first two phrases would be parallel: 'Rejoice, young one, in your youth, and let your heart gladden you in the days of your youth.' Alternatively, it may be read as an imperfect verb, in which case the *waw* indicates a consecutive progression from the first phrase to the second: 'Rejoice, young one, in your youth, and [then] your heart *will* gladden you in the days of your youth.' If this latter applies, there may also be intended a progression from **ילדותיך** to **בחורותך**: 'Rejoice, young one, in your childhood, and then your heart will gladden you throughout the days of your youth.'

The second clause again picks up on **טוב**, and again uses it very positively. Elsewhere in Qohelet **טוב** is used with **לב**: the author says 'to his heart', **ראה בטוב** in 2:1; in 7:3 we find the proverb, **כעס משחק כי ברע פנים ייטב לב**; and the admonition, **שתה בלב-טוב יינך**, is given in 9:7. Moreover, **נפש** seems sometimes to be used as a synonym for **לב** when it is used with



מהסר את-נפשי מטובה, in 4:8, הראה את-נפשו טוב, in 2:24 where we read, טוב, and in 6:3, ונפשו לא-תשבע מן-הטובה.

Considering the seemingly synonymous use at times of לב and נפש, there seems to be some tension between the third clause in 11:9 and 6:9,

טוב מראה עינים מהלך-נפש	6:9
והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך	11:9

11:9 is remarkably positive about both parts of the comparison in 6:9, particularly in light of Num 15:39<sup>4</sup>,

והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את-כל-מצוה יהוה ועשיתם אתם ולא-תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר-אתם זנים אחריהם

It also forms a contrast to the statement that וגם בדרך כשהסכל הלך לבו חסר ואמר לכל סכל הוא, in 10:3. It may be significant that the word לבך is precisely at the centre of the clause in 11:9, because there has been no reference to 'the heart' since 10:3 although it occurs with a degree of consistency throughout the book up to that point. The three occurrences in 11:9,10 are notable because they all take the second person singular pronominal suffix in contrast to the twelve occurrences up to 2:18 which all take the first person singular suffix. From 2:18-11:9 לב takes first, second and third person suffixes, and this is further illustration of the development from first person at the start of the book, through a mixture of first, second and third in the following chapters, to second person address at the end:

Some commentators<sup>5</sup> see the final part of 11:9 as a damper on the seeming positiveness of the early parts of the verse, while others consider it to be 'out of harmony with the context'<sup>6</sup>, and others describe it as 'moralistic gloss'<sup>7</sup>. However, it might also be a warning to keep the desires of one's heart and eyes in check<sup>8</sup>. This is fully in keeping with the use of words from the root שפט elsewhere in Qohelet: the author observed in 3:16 that 'under the sun' מקום המשפט שמה הרשע ומקום הצדק שמה הרשע, but in the next verse (s)he asserts that

<sup>4</sup>In light of this, Salters (1988:50) maintains that 11:9 is 'one of the most controversial in the book.' He explores in some detail the history of its interpretation, and is of the opinion that 11:9b is an addition, but notes (p.55),

The early interpreters, faced with 9a, 9b and 10 were inclined to interpret differently, chiefly because the context was different for them and *the presence of a few ambiguous terms* and a *hapax legomenon* made their guidelines confusing.' [Our emphasis].

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Loader (1986:130).

<sup>6</sup>Barton (1912:185).

<sup>7</sup>Crenshaw (1988:184).

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Fox (1989:279); Ogden (1987:195); Whybray (1989:161).

*both* **יש עת ומשפט**; and the book concludes in 12:14, כי את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל-נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע. We should also note that in 3:17 and 8:6 **כל-הפץ** will be brought to judgment - and while this might mean simply 'all matters', it could also mean 'all delights' or 'pleasures' which would be a fitting description for the first two sections of 11:9.

The imperative with which the last section of the verse commences, **ודע**, is probably designed to recall **לא-תדע** in vv.2,5, and **אינך יודע** in vv.5,6, as well as **לא-ידע** in 10:14,15. There is considerable irony in such great emphasis on what is *not* known being followed by the imperative, 'know!' On twenty occasions throughout the book the author asserts that people do not know (2:19; 3:21; 4:13,17; 6:5,12; 8:1,5,7; 9:1,5,10,11,12; 10:14,15; 11:2,5,5,6), but only five times does (s)he claim to know something, thus drawing particular attention to these things. The first of these, in 1:17, is ironical because the author claims to know that the search for knowledge, among other things, is like chasing the wind. (S)he next claims to know that 'all meet one fate' (2:14), then that 'there is nothing good in people but to enjoy themselves' (3:12). In 3:14 the claim is made to know that God's deeds endure forever, and in 8:12 that 'it will go well with those who fear God.' In addition, the wise know **ועת ומשפט** (8:5), and the living know that they will die (9:5). These are crucial aspects of Qohelet's examination of life 'under the sun'. However, it should be noted that Qohelet also claims that people do not know their time (of death? 9:12); nor what happens at or after death (3:21; 8:7?; 10:14?), except that the dead know nothing (9:5,10); people do not know what is good for them during their lives (6:12); nor do they know the deeds of God (11:5).

The first half of v.10 conveys similar sentiments to the first half of v.9, but by the use of negative transitive imperatives rather than the positive intransitive ones used there: in v.9 the reader is told to 'rejoice' and to 'walk', in v.10 the imperatives are 'remove [pain]' and 'banish [misery]'. V.10 is also constructed in the form of two carefully balanced clauses:

<u>noun for part of "yourself"</u>	<u>noun for "pain"</u>	<u>hiphil imperative for "remove"</u>
מלבך מבשרך	כעס רעה	והסר והעבר

**כעס** is used on six other occasions in this book: in 1:18 it is said to result from great wisdom, while in 7:9 (where it occurs twice) it is associated with fools; and in both 2:23 and 5:16 it is connected with work. Considering the use of the plural **ימי** four times in 11:8-12:1,



and the assertion in 11:8 that אם-שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח, there may be a deliberate contrast drawn with 2:23 and 5:16,

כל-ימיו מכאבים וכעס  
כל-ימיו בחשך יאכל וכעס הרבה

Moreover, 7:3 states, טוב כעס משחק כי-ברע פנים ייטב לב, and there seems to be some tension between the sentiments of this verse, where lightness of spirit is considered of less value than כעס and where רע פנים is said to ייטב לב, and 11:9,10 where the reader is admonished to put away כעס and רעה, and where the expression יטיב לבך is connected with 'rejoicing' and 'walking in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.'

12:1 has links with 11:9 because the first part of both opens with an imperative drawn from 11:8, and ends with the expression בימי בחורות(י)ך,

שמח בחור בילדותיך ויטיב לבך	11:9
וזכר את-בוראיך	12:1
בימי בחורותיך	

In this way 12:1a serves to link together the passage about 'enjoying the days of your youth' in 11:9-10 and the passage which focuses on approaching death, 12:1-7. However, it should be noted that, typical of Qohelet, the word בחורות(י)ך is different in the two verses, although it seems to convey the same thing.

The main point of ambiguity in 12:1a involves the middle word of the clause, בוראיך. It appears to be a participial form from the root ברא, 'shape, form', which is not used elsewhere in the book, but is used in the Hebrew Bible exclusively to describe the creative activity of God. This reading is attested by all the versions, but Crenshaw (1988:184) argues that 'allusion to God the Creator ill fits this context', and Whitley (1979:95) maintains that '"Creator" is strange in a context which has nothing to do with religion', and goes on to say, 'it is highly probable that 12:1a is a gloss'<sup>9</sup>. These commentators indicate other possibilities for translation which would require some emendation of the MT: בארך, 'your well', symbolising a man's wife (cf Prov 5:15-18); בורך, 'your pit', indicating the grave (cf Pss 55:24; 69:16)<sup>10</sup>; or ברואיך, 'your fat-ness' or 'well-being'<sup>11</sup>. If 12:1 runs parallel to 11:8, then the second of the above seems to give the closest equivalent to ויזכר את-ימי החשך; but the third requires least emendation, although for it to make sense we should assume Aramaic influence

<sup>9</sup>Barton (1912:185) also suggests that it is a gloss.

<sup>10</sup>Crenshaw (1974:29) argues that the word is 'a double entendre for grave and cistern (wife; cf Prov 5:15-19).'

<sup>11</sup>Salter (1988:57) argues that it is a corruption of בריך from ברי, meaning 'health, vigour'.

(cf Targum Exod 21:19), since the word does not convey the notion of 'well-being' in the Hebrew Bible. However, there seems no convincing reason for changing the present text, and other commentators maintain that "'Creator" is extremely appropriate' (Whybray, 1989a:163): Eaton (1983:148) goes so far as to maintain that 'Parallel passages (Deut 8:18; Neh 4:14), the gravity of the command (vv. 2-6), its religious context (cf 11:9; 12:13f), all *demand* the translation "Creator"' [our emphasis]; Schoors (1992:73) states, 'בּוֹרְאֵיךְ certainly means "your creator" and the plural form expresses the excellence like in אֱלֹהִים;' and Davis (1991:302-4) points out that 'The passage [12:1-7] is framed by reference to God ... God is present at the beginning and the ending of life ... the one from whom life comes (v.1) and the one to whom life returns (v.7).' It may be that the author used this word specifically because of the associations it might create in the reader's mind with other words.

Even if this translation is accepted, the reason why the author included the word is still unclear. As with much of Qohelet, it could be positive or negative. A positive reading might recall the seemingly very positive passages where God's gift is mentioned (2:24,26; 3:13; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-9); a negative reading might follow Fox's (1989:300) reasoning that 'to think on one's creator is to think of death, for, as 12:7 says, the life-breath must go back to the one who gave it', or it may recall the statement הוּא עֲנִין רַע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבִנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוּת בּוֹ in 1:13, and the similar one in 3:10. However, it is also possible that 12:1a serves as a summary or conclusion of 11:9-10, in which case its purpose may be to remind the reader that God will bring everything into judgment (3:17-18; 11:9) - a theme reiterated in the last verse of the book. As we shall see when we discuss that verse, and indeed as we have already seen in our consideration of 11:9-10, this too could be either positive or negative: 'live life to the full, remembering that God will judge any wrongs committed by you or anyone else,' or, 'you may as well make the most of the opportunities life presents, for in the end God will deal with you however he pleases.'

One further anomaly still remains with the word בּוֹרְאֵיךְ: its seemingly plural ending, -יךְ. It has been variously explained as the 'plural of majesty'<sup>12</sup>, a 'mixing of *lamedh alep* and *lamedh he* verbs'<sup>13</sup>, a 'fuller representation of the e-vowel'<sup>14</sup>, and as an error<sup>15</sup>. It is possible

<sup>12</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:184); Eaton (1983:148). See also Isa 54:5; Ps 149:2; Job 35:10. But see Ges<sup>K</sup> 124k.

<sup>13</sup>Crenshaw (1988:184); cf Fox (1989:299); Gordis (1968:340). See also Ges<sup>K</sup> 75nn-rr.

<sup>14</sup>Fox (1989:299). See also Ges<sup>K</sup> 93ss, and the verses cited there.

<sup>15</sup>Barton (1912:195).



to argue for any of these positions, and there is none which can claim to be definitive. We should note that בילדותיך in 11:9 also has a plural ending, and בחורותיך does not have the plural *yodh* in 11:9, but בחורתיך in 12:1 does.

The use of זכר here and in 11:8 is noteworthy. The root זכר is used eight times in Qohelet, and on every occasion apart from 11:8 and 12:1 it is used negatively to indicate that someone or something is *not* remembered:

<u>אין זכרון לראשנים וגם לאחרנים שיהיו לא-יהיה להם זכרון עם שיהיו לאחרנה</u>	1:11
<u>אין זכרון לחכם עם-הכסיל לעולם בשכבר הימים הבאים הכל נשכח ואין</u>	2:16
<u>לא הרבה יזכר את-ימי חייו כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו</u>	5:19
<u>החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אינם יודעים מאומה ואין-עוד להם שכר כי נשכח זכרם</u>	9:5
<u>לא זכר את-האיש המסכן ההוא</u>	9:15

In chs.1,2 it is stressed that there is *no* remembrance, and that everything/everyone is forgotten by those who come after them; in 5:19 people do not even remember the days of their own lives; in 9:5 we are told again that once people are dead memory of them is forgotten; and in 9:15 a specific example is given of an individual who it seems had saved a whole city but was still forgotten. By contrast, 11:8 and 12:1 exhort the reader to do precisely what according to the rest of the book people do not do - 'remember!'. However, it may be that the word has a slightly different nuance in these two verses, as perhaps also in 5:19. Usually it refers to recalling something or someone that has been in the past, but here it seems to indicate a calling to mind of a present reality.

### 16.1.3 12:1b-8

Where in 11:8 the contrast is drawn between ימי החשך and שנים הרבה יחיה, these probably indicating life and death, the contrast in 12:1 is between ימי הרעה and ימי בחורתיך, probably indicating youth and old age<sup>16</sup>. There is some tension between the assertion in 11:8 that a person who lives many years will enjoy *all* of them, and the reference in 12:1 to days when one says that there is no pleasure in them. There is also a contrast here with the person in 5:16 of whom it is said, כל-ימיו בחשך יאכל. A further tension is revealed when we compare the last four words of 12:1 with the references elsewhere in Qohelet to כל-חפץ:

<sup>16</sup>But Ogden (1984:34) states, 'it appears *incontrovertible* that death and one's fate in Sheol are what Qoheleth has in mind in this section' [our emphasis]. Cf Sawyer (1975:523).

עת לכל- חפץ	3:1
עת לכל- חפץ	3:17
לכל- חפץ יש עת	8:6
חפץ	אין לי בהם 12:1

The tension is revealed most particularly between 8:6 and 12:1 because of the use of *יש* and *אין*.

In v.3 'the day' is used in the singular, and it seems to be the main subject of the second *עד אשר לא-* section of ch.12 starting in v.2. It may be significant that it is singular when the plural occurs four times in the preceding verses. Perhaps it indicates one *particular* day, as opposed to the 'days of darkness', the 'days of youth', and the 'days of misery'. The singular is used also in 7:1 where we read that *יום המות [טוב] מיום הולדו*, and 8:8 also mentions *יום המות*. The only other occurrences are in 8:16, where it is contrasted with night, and twice in 7:14, *ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה גם את-זה לעמת-זה עשה האלהים*. 7:14 is particularly pertinent to the expression *ימי הרעה* in 12:1, and provides further evidence in favour of viewing this expression as a reference to something that happens during life, i.e. old age, rather than something that happens at or after death. Indeed, the passage from vv.2-5 has usually been understood either as an allegory, or as a series of figures, for the decrepitude which accompanies old age, and some of the images do seem highly appropriate to such a reading. Moreover, where 7:1 explicitly compares 'the day of death' favourably against 'the day of birth' (*יום הולדו*), 11:9-12:4 portrays 'the days of youth' (*ילדות*) favourably against its opposite - presumably old age.

Nonetheless, there may be an allusion to the day of one's death. This seems the more satisfactory reading of the singular in contrast to the plurals used earlier, particularly if 'the day' is understood in eschatological terms to refer to the *end* of a person's life<sup>17</sup>; and other parts of the passage could also be read in eschatological terms, particularly the darkening of the sun and other lights, and the gathering clouds in v.2. Moreover, the end of v.5 seems clearly to refer to death, as does v.7.

Commentators offer a variety of different theories about how these verses should be read. Some view v.2 as a description of an approaching storm with the following verses des-

<sup>17</sup>Fox explores this theory very thoroughly and convincingly (1988; 1989:281-310), although his argument about funeral imagery is less convincing. Cf Jarick (1990) who expounds Gregory Thaumaturgos' treatment of the passage in eschatological terms. Jarick usefully parallels Qoh 12:1-7, Targ. and Gregory.



cribing the effect this has on a household: the approaching storm represents the pending disaster of death which is addressed specifically in v.5<sup>18</sup>. Another theory regards these verses as a description of a funeral procession, leading up to explicit mention of death at the end of the section<sup>19</sup>. Sawyer (1975:521) reads the passage as a parable about a ruined house, indicating 'the failure of human efforts in general'<sup>20</sup>. The early Jewish commentators seem to have sought to connect each figure in these verses with an anatomical detail which served to picture the failing of an old person's body<sup>21</sup>. And some other commentators see in these verses a number of different figures which, although they bear no connection to each other on the literal level, are all images portraying old age or death<sup>22</sup>.

V.2 focuses on natural luminaries: הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, 'the sun', הַיָּרֵחַ, 'the moon', and הַכּוֹכָבִים, 'the stars'; and also the natural elements of הָעָנָנִים, 'the clouds', and הַגֶּשֶׁם, 'the rain'. As we commented above, 'under the sun', and 'seeing the sun' seem to be images or metaphors for life on earth, and therefore the 'darkening' of the sun in this verse is an appropriate way to depict death or approaching death. This is particularly so in view of the contrast with 11:7: וּמִתּוֹק הָאוֹר וטוב לעינים לראות את-השמש. Although the sun is not specifically mentioned in 12:3, a similar impression is given by the phrase, וַחֲשָׁכוּ הָרְאוֹת בָּאֲרָבוֹת.

The other luminaries, הַיָּרֵחַ and הַכּוֹכָבִים occur only in 12:2 in Qohelet. The three luminaries together function elsewhere as a sign of God's creation, as Gen 1:14-19 makes clear, and also such passages as Jer 31:35, which describes God's provision of these elements, כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה נָתַן שֶׁמֶשׁ לְאוֹר יוֹמָם חֶקֶת יָרֵחַ וְכּוֹכָבִים לְאוֹר לַיְלָה, and Isa 13:10, which describes the 'day of the Lord' in terms of the removal of the light shed by precisely the same luminaries as here, כּוֹכָבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַסִּילֵיהֶם לֹא יִהְיוּ אֹרֶם חֹשֶׁךְ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּצֵאתוֹ וִירֵחַ לֹא-יָגִיחַ אֹרֶם. Moreover, Isa 13:10 also refers to the 'darkening' of the sun, and the cessation of 'light', using the same

<sup>18</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:183,185-187); Davidson (1986:85-86); Eaton (1983:147); Whybray (1989:164-165). Actually most commentators past and present adopt this interpretation to a greater or lesser extent.

<sup>19</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:287).

<sup>20</sup>But Sawyer argues (1975:523),

The allegorical interpretation is so ancient and firmly established that it is liable to have influenced the text itself. The MT, in other words, has an allegory here and to recover an original 'pre-allegorical' tradition may involve textual emendation.

<sup>21</sup>See also Loader (1986:131).

<sup>22</sup>E.g., Gordis (1968:339); Ogden (1987:198). Barton (1912:186) says, 'the metaphors change and intermingle in accord with the richness of an Oriental imagination.' Sawyer (1975:519n.1) lists a large number of commentators who read this way, and most modern commentators agree that there is no totally consistent image running through these verses.

words that appear in Qoh 12:2. Is the author, then, deliberately employing eschatological language, as Fox (1989:290-294) suggests? The answer to this question is probably 'yes'. Ezek 32:7 uses 'clouds' in the description of disaster wrought by the Lord - although a different word is used for clouds:

וּכְסִיתִי בְּכַבּוּתְךָ שָׁמַיִם וְהִקְדַּרְתִּי אֶת-כִּכְבְּיָהֶם שֶׁמֶשׁ בַּעֲנָן אֲכַסְנוּ וַיֵּרַח לֹא-יֵאִיר אֹרֶךְ כָּל-מֵאוּרֵי אֹרֶךְ  
בְּשָׁמַיִם אֲקִדִּירֶם עָלֶיךָ וְנָתַתִּי חֹשֶׁךְ עַל-אֲרֻצְךָ נֶאֱמַר אֲדֹנִי יְהוָה

Also in Joel 2:2 and Zeph 1:15 darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ) and clouds (again עָנָן) are associated with 'the day of the Lord'. It may be that the literal picture in this verse is that of a storm of such intensity that the light of the sun and the moon and stars is subdued - perhaps suggesting that the storm lasts through both day and night - and even after rain has fallen, the clouds still persist, ready to empty themselves again over the earth. But the verse also seems pregnant with the symbolism of a disaster of considerable consequence. In view of the mention of 'your Creator' in v.1, and the return of 'the dust to the ground from which it came' and of the spirit/breath to 'the God who gave it' in v.7, it may be that something of a reversal of the creative act of God is what is pictured here.

The words הַגִּשָּׁם and הָעִבִּים, which are used in the final clause of this verse, occur elsewhere in Qohelet only in 11:3,4, and it may be that this final clause recalls these verses to the reader's mind. How they relate to our verse will depend on how the earlier verses are understood. If they indicate that the clouds appear and the rain falls at an *appropriate* time, then the implication may be that old age and death also occur at an appropriate time. However, if they indicate that rains fall and winds blow and there is nothing one can do about it, then the implication in 12:2 may be that there is nothing that can be done to prevent the onslaught of old age and death.

The use of חֹשֶׁךְ and אֹרֶךְ in 12:2 is important. As we noted in our discussion of 11:7,8 above, light and darkness seem universally to be used symbolically to represent good and evil, and life and death. We noted that מִתּוֹק הָאֹרֶךְ וטוֹב לְעֵינַיִם לִרְאוֹת אֶת-הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ in 11:7 seems clearly to exalt life and portray it as something very positive. This positive attitude is continued in 11:8a which explains v.7 thus: כִּי אִם-שָׁנִים הָרַבָּה יַחִיָּה הָאָדָם בְּכָל־יְשֻׁמָּה. However, 11:8b offers a contrast to this positive note when it introduces the concept of יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ - and this probably refers to death, when the light of life has been removed. The mention of the abstract notion of הָאֹרֶךְ in the middle of a list of natural luminaries is odd. It may be, as some



commentators suggest<sup>23</sup>, that a hendiadys is intended here - 'the light *of* the moon and the stars', as opposed to 'the light *and* the moon and the stars' - although no exact parallel occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>24</sup>, and the disjunctive *zaqeph* accent would be a problem for this reading. But we should note two points: firstly, in the creation account in Gen ch.1, **אור** is created on day one although the luminaries are not created until day four; and secondly, **אור** plays a major role in the eschatological passages we mentioned above. Whether or not it functions as a separate entity in our verse, it plays a vital role in the verse by being opposed to darkness.

As we discussed above, on the literal level this section describes a household facing a storm of immense proportions that cause people to be gripped by terror:

in the day  
when the keepers of the house tremble,  
and the powerful men bend themselves,  
and the grinders cease because they are few,  
and the women who look through the windows are darkened,  
and the doors are shut in the street  
when the sound of the grinding falls

But this description seems awkward and exaggerated<sup>25</sup>, and the details seem readily to lend themselves to figurative interpretation. Thus the passage may be read as a series of metaphors for the decrepitude of old age,

in the day when the hands tremble,  
and the legs become crooked,  
and the teeth cease to function because they are few,  
and the eyes in their sockets are darkened,  
and the ears/lips/eyelids close  
when sounds get quieter

But here also the reader has to work very hard to make sense of the verses, because the gaps (s)he has to fill in are considerable<sup>26</sup>. It may be then that the reader will gain the impression

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Gordis (1968:341); Whybray (1989:164). Gordis cites a number examples of hendiadys in the Hebrew Bible, but none uses three terms as this verse would do.

<sup>24</sup>See, e.g., Fox (1989:300).

<sup>25</sup>Whybray (1989:164), for instance, says,

The verbs, however, do not entirely fit the imagery of the threatened house: it is not clear why the strong men should, under those circumstances, be *bent*, why it should be said that the mill-girls should *cease because they are few*, or what is meant by saying that the ladies of the house are *dimmed* or darkened. There seems to be a confusion or alternation in the verse between the metaphors and the realities which they represent.

<sup>26</sup>Fox's (1989:287) assertion that 'The funerary interpretation can, I believe, account for the passage as a whole better than can the figurative approach' is not convincing, because it requires too many of the terms to take on a meaning they do not bear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. He goes on to admit that 'many gaps remain, and not all details accommodate themselves to the funeral-scene interpretation'. Cf Fox (1988:59) where he suggests that 'the poem's enigmatic character ... may be deliberate.'

that the passage conveys something more, functioning on more than one level<sup>27</sup>. The sense of fear and pending doom is clear, and however the text is understood at the surface level, the eschatological language from v.2 may carry over into the later verses so that there is an underlying theme related to the approaching 'end'. If this is the case, v.5 makes it quite clear that the 'end' in view is a person's death; and in view of the second person clause which introduces 12:1-7, וזכר את-בוראיך בימי בחורתיך, that person is 'you' - by implication the reader him- or herself.

The third section of this passage is very difficult and a number of problems face the interpreter. The first question concerns the use of the third person singular in ויקום, the first word of the section. All the finite verbs in section two are third person plural verbs, and indeed if anatomical details are symbolised, these too are all plural: hands, legs, teeth, eyes, and ears/lips/eyelids. To whom, then, does this singular verb refer? There seem to be four possible answers: either (1) הצפור, which is the only singular noun available, is the subject of the verb; or, (2) יקום is used in an impersonal sense<sup>28</sup> to mean 'one rises'; or, (3) the subject is the person pictured, but not specifically mentioned, in the previous section; or, (4) the preposition ל- is not original and קול הצפור is the subject<sup>29</sup>. The first is unlikely on two accounts: צפור is almost always (but see Ps 102:8) a feminine noun while this is a masculine verb; and also it seems likely that the lack of an article on קול is because it is in a construct relationship with הצפור as it was with הטחנה in the preceding clause. The second may be read to indicate that 'people [in general] tend to rise when the birds start singing', thus using the imperfect to indicate habitual action, rather than future action as is probably intended in the previous section. The third would indicate that the passage has shifted from representing old age figuratively, to presenting it in more literal terms. Presumably, the sense of our clause would be something like, '[because an old person sleeps so poorly] he arises [because he is woken] at the sound of the bird'. However, this would be inappropriate if the preceding line does refer to the failure of one's sense of hearing. The fourth requires emendation of the MT without good evidence.

<sup>27</sup>Fox (1988; 1989:281-311) explores numerous levels at which 12:1-7 can be read.

<sup>28</sup>So Schoors (1992:155-6).

<sup>29</sup>Sawyer (1975:526) argues,

The question of why it [ל] appears in the MT (it can hardly be a scribal error) is best answered by reference to the allegorical interpretation which dominates the masoretic tradition.



Whatever precisely the first clause indicates, it seems to stand in contrast to the second clause. The two clauses might be compared thus:

<u>things that sing</u>	<u>"kol"-sound</u>	<u>imperfect verb</u>	<u>waw</u>
הצפור	לקול	יקום	-ו
בנות השיר	כל-	ישחו	-ו

The similarity in the structure of these two clauses becomes even more noticable if we highlight the 'u' and 'o' sounds, thus:

<u>things that sing</u>	<u>"kol"-sound</u>	<u>imperfect verb</u>	<u>waw</u>
הצפור	לקול	יקום	-ו
בנות השיר	כל-	ישחו	-ו

The two verbs are antithetical in meaning, קום meaning 'to rise up', and שחח meaning 'to bow down'. שחח may refer to bowing down in homage<sup>30</sup>, or in humility<sup>31</sup>, or in mourning<sup>32</sup>. The niph'al here means 'are brought low', whether physically or in humility. We should note that on the three other occasions when the niph'al of this verb is used (Isa 2:9; 5:15 and 29:4), it is used in parallel to the verb שפל: the phrase וישח אדם וישפל-איש, found in both Isa 2:9 and 5:15 illustrates this well. This means that the last clause in the previous section may be parallel to the second clause here, and provide a link between the two sections:

<u>things that make noise</u>	<u>"kol"-sound</u>	<u>verb</u>	
הטנחה	קול	שפל	-ב
הצפור	לקול	יקום	-ו
בנות השיר	כל-	ישחו	-ו

The link with the first clause is established by the use of the word קול, while the word שפל suggests a connection with the second clause.

What the second clause means will depend on how the phrase בנות השיר, 'daughters of song' is understood. There are a number of different ways the expression could be interpreted: Barton (1912:195) suggests that it symbolises the 'notes of songs', so that the phrase represents the feeble quality of the voice<sup>33</sup>; Crenshaw (1988:186) points out that it could represent 'dancing women' which would once have brought pleasure; Fox (1989:304) contends that it is mourning women that are portrayed<sup>34</sup>. However, considering the similarity in structure we noticed between the two halves of this line, it may be that בנות השיר is parallel to

<sup>30</sup>E.g., Isa 60:14; Prov 14:19.

<sup>31</sup>E.g., Isa 2:11; Job 9:13.

<sup>32</sup>E.g., Pss 35:14; 38:7.

<sup>33</sup>Cf Gordis (1968:344); Whybray (1989:165).

<sup>34</sup>But a specific word is used for mourners at the end of v.5.

בעל הכנפים in the first clause. The phraseology would then be similar to the expression בעל הלשון for a bird in 10:20, and also בעל הלשון for a snake charmer in 10:11<sup>35</sup>. If this is the case, the second half of v.4 could be rendered: 'he/one rises to the sound of the bird, *but* all the singing birds are brought down.' The line could then be read either to mean that the *sound* of the singing birds, like that of the grinding, is brought low because of the deafness of old age, or that the singing birds themselves are brought low, perhaps because of the storm or calamity.

Such an understanding of the last part of v.4 might also help to explain the first part of v.5, גם מגבה יראו וחתחתים בדרך. The verb יראו is anomalous, but if it is retained as a plural, it seems most obviously to refer to בנות השיר of the previous verse. If, then, the verb is read according to its consonants, as the third person plural perfect of ראה, 'to see' (as is the case in LXX), the clause might be translated, 'also they looked from a height and there were dangers in the path.' However, the previous clause informed us that they have been brought low. It is, therefore, probably more appropriate to read the verb as ייראו, (which is represented in some 95 mss<sup>36</sup>) they are afraid<sup>37</sup>, in which case the clause could be rendered, 'also they are scared of the height and the dangers in the path.' This might again refer to a storm or calamity from which even the birds take shelter.

However, almost all commentators see here a reference to the fear old people have of heights, and how for them even walking along a path is fraught with fear because of the unsteadiness of their steps<sup>38</sup>. Such an interpretation is possible if ייראו is read for יראו, and it would be appropriate if this section is a literal description of the condition of an old person.

The word מגבה is, though, a problem for both of these readings. Nowhere else in biblical Hebrew is it used to indicate the abstract notion of 'heights', for which the words מרום and מרומים are used. Rather, it is an adjective, occasionally used with a nominal sense, which is applied to things that are tall or lofty: trees<sup>39</sup>; mountains<sup>40</sup>; people<sup>41</sup>; etc. It is also used to indicate an exalted station, usually with the sense of haughtiness, as is the case on the other

<sup>35</sup>See Ogden (1987:204); Whitley (1979:97).

<sup>36</sup>Cf Schoors (1992:28).

<sup>37</sup>See also the use of ייראו for יראו in 1 Sam 17:11.

<sup>38</sup>See, e.g., Barton (1912:189); Crenshaw (1988:187); Davidson (1986:86); Eaton (1983:149); Gordis (1968:344); Loader (1986:131); Whybray (1989:165).

<sup>39</sup>E.g., Ezek 17:24.

<sup>40</sup>E.g., Gen 7:19.

<sup>41</sup>E.g., 1 Sam 9:12.



occasions it is used in Qohelet (5:7,7,7; 7:8). This is also the case in Isa 5:15, which we commented on above, וישח אדם וישפל-איש ועיני גבהים תשפלות. While ‘also they fear the exalted one’ is a possible translation, and might explain why the ‘daughters of song’, if they are people, are brought low - either in fear or in humility - such a reading seems to make little sense in the context of this passage.

The word חתחתים occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. It is from the root חתת, ‘be shattered, dismayed’, which is not found elsewhere in Qohelet, although it is reasonably common in biblical Hebrew. It finds parallels elsewhere in such words as תלתלים in Cant 5:11, and גלגל in Ezek 10:2 and also in Qoh 12:6. It may be, as Whybray (1989a:166) suggests, that ‘its reduplicated form suggests *extreme* fear’ [his emphasis]. This would tie in with the exaggerated language in v.3.

The final three clauses in this section are exceedingly difficult, and their meaning is much disputed. All six words appear only here in Qohelet, and the meaning of some of them is uncertain, and the translation even more obscure. The three clauses seem, at least in some respects, to be in parallel: each contains a third person singular, hiphil or hithpael, imperfect verb preceded by *waw* and followed by a definite singular noun:

singular noun	article	3s imperfect verb	waw
שקד	-ה	ינאץ	-ו
חגב	-ה	יסתבל	-ו
אביונה	-ה	תפר	-ו

This might suggest that they are all intended to display a similar meaning.

We will start by considering the three nouns. The root שקד means ‘watch, wake’, and the noun שִׁקְדָּה, which occurs three times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>42</sup>, means ‘almond/almond tree’, ‘so called’, according to BDB (p.1052a), ‘from its early *waking* out of winter’s sleep’. The connection with ‘waking’ may recall to the reader’s mind the start of v.4b, ויקום לקול הצפור.

חגב seems to be the only word in the Hebrew Bible (apart, perhaps, from three proper nouns) from the root חגב, and it occurs in only four other places in the Hebrew Bible<sup>43</sup>, where it means ‘grasshopper, locust’. In Num 13:33 and Isa 40:22 the word is used to emphasise

<sup>42</sup>Gen 43:11; Num 17:23; Jer 1:11.  
<sup>43</sup>Lev 11:22; Num 13:33; Isa 40:22; 2 Chr 7:13. It is perhaps noteworthy that among the different types of locust mentioned in Joel, this word does not occur.

smallness, and in 2 Chr 7:13 locusts are mentioned as an instrument of the Lord’s destruction. Some commentators suggest that the similarity in sound between חגב and עגב, ‘lust’, is significant (and we might also note that the root חבב means ‘love’), while Fox (1989:306) argues that it should be emended to חצב, a plant-name attested in the Mishna.

The word אביונה is not found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but does occur in Mishna and Talmud with the meaning ‘caper’ or ‘caperberry’. It appears to be from the root אבה, ‘be willing, consent’, from which the similar word אביון, indicating poverty or neediness, derives. Most commentators draw attention to the aphrodisiac properties of the caper, but it is not certain that such qualities were ascribed to it at the time when Qohelet was written<sup>44</sup>. However, it seems that capers were used as a flavouring to stimulate appetite.

We might represent the meaning of these nouns in this way:

Hebrew word	probable meaning	possible associations
השדק	the almond [tree]	waking/watching
החגב	grasshopper/locust	smallness, lust (עגב, חבב)
האביונה	caper [berry/bush]	neediness, appetite (sexual?)

All that we can say with any certainty at this point is that all the nouns refer to aspects of nature, like הצפור and possibly בנות השיר earlier in the section, as opposed to words associated with human activity in the previous section. Gordis (1968:346) regards these as all *clearly* in some way symbolic of sexual activity, or more properly the lack of it, but this can hardly be said to be ‘clear’.

We will now consider the verbs in these clauses. וַיִּנְאֹץ is anomalous. If the consonants are followed, the verb may be derived from the root נאץ, ‘despise, spurn’. The phrase would then mean something like, ‘he despises the almond’. The pointing, however, is suggestive of the hiphil imperfect from the geminate root נִצֵץ, ‘shine, sparkle, blossom’. The hiphil is used also in Cant 6:11 and 7:13 to indicate blossoming, and the same usage would render the phrase here, ‘the almond blossoms’. In this case, however, the *aleph* is anomalous, but this would not be without precedent in the Hebrew Bible where we find an anomalous *aleph* in קאם in Hos 10:14, and in ראש in Prov 13:23<sup>45</sup>.

The form of the verb ויסתבל is less problematic because it conforms to the normal rules for the hithpael imperfect. Its meaning, however, is more difficult because the hithpael form

<sup>44</sup>Whybray (1989:166), for example, notes: ‘the idea that the caper has aphrodisiac qualities does not appear in extant literature earlier than the mediaeval Jewish commentaries.’ But Moore (1891) argues to the contrary.  
<sup>45</sup>See Ges<sup>K</sup> 73g.



of this verb is not used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Other forms of the verb are used seven times elsewhere<sup>46</sup> and they always have the sense of 'bearing' some kind of literal or metaphorical burden. The hithpael presumably means something like 'burden oneself'. This being the case, this second clause might be rendered, 'the locust burdens himself [with food?].' However, a number of manuscripts read וִיסְתַּכֵּל here, presumably with the meaning that the locust is 'confused'.

וּתְפַר seems also to follow biblical norms: it appears to be the third person feminine singular of the imperfect hiphil form of the geminate verb פָּרַר, 'to break, frustrate'. However, this verb seems to make little sense in its context if we render the words literally: 'the caper-berry/bush is broken/frustrated'<sup>47</sup>. For this reason most commentators<sup>48</sup> take אֲבִיּוֹנָה as symbolic of desire or appetite, and interpret the clause to mean that it is this which is broken or frustrated. Others propose emending the verb to פָּרָה, 'bear fruit, be fruitful', which would make the third clause closer in meaning to the first: 'the caper bears fruit'. Fox (1989:306) suggests that the word should in fact be derived from פָּרוּחַ, 'bud; sprout', which gives an even closer parallel to the first clause, this parallel appearing in Cant 7:13.

We might represent the possible meanings of the verbs thus:

<u>Hebrew word</u>	<u>possible roots</u>	<u>possible meaning</u>
<u>וִינָאֵץ</u>	<u>נָאֵץ/נִצֵּץ</u>	<u>blossoms; spurns</u>
<u>וִיסְתַּכֵּל</u>	<u>סָכַל/סִכַּל</u>	<u>burdens himself; is confused</u>
<u>וּתְפַר</u>	<u>פָּרַח/פָּרָה/פָּרַר</u>	<u>broken; frustrated; bears fruit; buds</u>

(The words underlined are those which seem to be closest to the MT.) If we combine this with the possible meanings/associations of the nouns, we get the following possibilities for translation of these clauses:

the almond blossoms,	the locust burdens himself,	and the caper bears fruit
he spurns the almond,	the locust is confused,	and the caper is broken
he hates waking,	he burdens himself with lust,	and desire is frustrated

These have been presented in terms of most consistent meanings throughout the line. The first line represents a surface reading where the fulness of nature is emphasised - the almond comes into flower ready for a healthy crop, the locust takes up a plentiful supply of food, and the caper bush bears its fruit. Presumably, this healthy picture of nature's abundance would form

<sup>46</sup>Qal: Gen 49:15; Isa 46:4,7; 53:4,11; Lam 5:7; and Pual: Ps 144:14.

<sup>47</sup>Moore (1891:64) says, 'the noun and the verb do not go together; that is, the present text is untranslatable.'

<sup>48</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:190); Crenshaw (1988:188); Davidson (1986:86); Eaton (1983:149); Gordis (1968:346); Whitley (1979:99-100); Whybray (1989:166-167).

a contrast to the decrepitude of the old person, in which case the first *waw* should be read as 'but' rather than 'and'<sup>49</sup>. The second line is also a surface reading, but it emphasises negative aspects of nature: perhaps the imagery is still that of a storm in which the blossom is blown off the almond tree, the locust is confused by the high wind, and the caper bush looses its branches or fruit, or is uprooted by the wind. This picture would continue the portrayal of the effects of a great storm or calamity, which in the previous section struck a house, and in this section brings destruction to nature as well. The third line is a figurative reading which regards all these clauses as images of sexual frustration, but it is also possible to see here descriptions of other aspects of old age: the almond's blossom representing white hair; the burdened locust as failing strength; and the frustrated caper as lack of appetite for food.

We should point out, that neither of the two surface readings represents the most accurate translation of the MT as it stands. If no emendation is made, the closest word-for-word translation would go something like this:

**The almond blossoms, the locust burdens himself, and/but the caper is broken**

This being the case, and considering the disjunctive accent between the second and third clauses, perhaps the meaning might be that the almond and the locust both display full signs of a healthy life, *but* the caper is frustrated because it no longer serves its purpose of stimulating desire (either sexual or for food). The ׀ with which the next section begins might go on then to explain why this is so. However, there seems to be little connection between this and what precedes it.

It must be admitted that none of the above translations of this second part of v.5 is totally satisfactory, and while attempts may be made at providing a consistent translation of this section, they must at best be tentative. It may be that the words used have meanings or connotations which have now been lost, or it may be that errors have crept in which have obscured the original sense of the text, or it may be that the text is designed to be elusive to

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<sup>49</sup>Cf, e.g., Loader (1986:131). Whybray (1989:167) describes this as 'an alternative but less probable interpretation.'



prompt the reader to fill in the gaps of indeterminacy in whatever way (s)he considers to be most appropriate<sup>50</sup>.

Gordis (1968:347) says of v.5 that the 'second half of the verse, unlike the first, is crystal-clear'. Certainly it presents fewer problems of translation, and in sharp contrast to the previous line where none of the words used is to be found elsewhere in Qohelet, all the words in this part of the verse occur in other verses in the book.

The word כִּי, with which this line begins, either indicates that what follows offers an explanation of the preceding - the immediately preceding, or all of vv.2-5 - or it is the asseverative and should be translated something like 'surely'. If the first section warns of a calamity that is going to strike, perhaps the role of this final section is to explain precisely what this calamity is - death.

The use of a participial form for הלך is remarkable because it is the only occurrence of this verbal form in ch.12. This serves to draw attention to it. The effect is probably to emphasise the fact that people in general *are going* to 'their eternal home'. הלך is used on a number of occasions in the Hebrew Bible to refer to one's journey from life to death<sup>51</sup>, and is used in this way in 1:4; 3:20; 5:14,14,15; 6:6 and 9:10 in Qohelet. It is perhaps noteworthy that most of these are also participial forms. 9:10 is particularly pertinent because it is addressed directly to the reader, שאול אשר אתה הלך שמה.

The occurrence of בית here may well pick up on its use in v.3. In v.3 the word was used in a section which described a household shutting down, with all its activities grinding to a halt. However, in this verse we read about a person's *eternal* home. This is probably intended as a contrast to v.3, particularly if the household referred to in that verse symbolises an aging body. It *might* be possible to view this as a reference to an afterlife in which one inhabits an eternal body. The expression בית עולמו does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but it is used in the Talmud (Ab Zar 10b) to refer to eternal life<sup>52</sup>. Most com-

<sup>50</sup>Fox (1988:63) says,

Already we have seen that some features of the picture - still taken quite literally - disturb the mental construction of the funeral scene. These features show that this is no ordinary funeral. By diverting our attention from the mundane, they provoke a reading on another level, a symbolic reading.

Ellul (1990:285) describes 12:2-8 as 'polysemous'.

<sup>51</sup>E.g., Ps 39:14; 1 Chr 17:11.

<sup>52</sup>Jenni (1952:203) also notes that only here in the Hebrew Bible does עולם appear with a pronominal suffix.

mentators<sup>53</sup>, however, regard this simply as a reference to the grave, a usage also found in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 19a). It is clearly stated in Qohelet that existence 'under the sun' ceases forever when one dies, חלק אין-להם (המתים) עוד לעולם בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש (9:6), and it also is claimed that even any memory of the dead is erased, אין זכרון לחכם עם-הסכל לעולם (2:16), but the assertions made in ch.3, that כל-אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם (3:14), and את-העלם נתן (האלהים) בלבם (3:11), could be taken to indicate that God has put something eternal within human beings.

The final clause makes clear that בית עולמו refers to death by its reference to the mourners<sup>54</sup>. A contrast is drawn between the reduction of activity in vv.3,4, and the activity of the mourners in this verse: it seems that the calamity, if this is what the earlier verses pointed to, has arrived.

There seem in v.6 to be two symbols of death<sup>55</sup>. Both depict the irreversible destruction of something valuable, presumably symbolising the destruction of life at the point of death. Gordis suggests (1968:348) that there may be 'only one figure here, that of a well, worked by a cord tied to a wheel', but it seems more likely that two images are intended: that of a lamp made of gold once suspended by a silver cord in the first half, and that of a well in the second half. A well would not be operated by a silver cord, nor use a golden bowl, while a decorative lamp might use both. Moreover, the metaphor is strengthened by the use of two images, one of which depicts the snuffing out of light, used also in Prov 13:9 of death, and the other the destruction of a well thus preventing access to water, water being used in Jer 2:13 and Ps 36:10 to symbolise life. Ps 36:10 is particularly relevant because it uses both images of water and light to symbolise life, כי-עמך מקור חיים באורך נראה-אור. These two images also recall 12:2 which mentioned light being darkened, and clouds coming after the rain. Indeed, it is possible that the storm imagery in that verse continues here<sup>56</sup>, because this would explain on a literal level the damage done to the lamp and the well.

The verb ירחק seems somewhat awkward. רחק means 'be, or become, distant', and is used as an adjective with the sense 'distant' in 7:23,24, and as a verb meaning 'distance

<sup>53</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:191); Crenshaw (1988:188); Fox (1989:306); Gordis (1968:347); Whybray (1989:167).

<sup>54</sup>But Youngblood (1986) argues for the interpretation 'dark house'. Cf Wolff (1974:124).

<sup>55</sup>But for a different view, see Bruns (1965).

<sup>56</sup>Leahy (1952:300) says,

All commentators find here a series of metaphors portraying sudden death. It may be, however, that the sacred writer intended to continue the literal description of the destruction wrought by the storm.



oneself' or 'refrain' in 3:5. Its meaning in this context must be something like 'made distant, removed': 'the silver cord is removed'. This makes sense, and might explain also why the 'golden bowl' has been damaged: its supporting cable has gone. However, we would expect a verb parallel to **תִּשְׁבֵּר** in the second half of this verse, and perhaps we should emend the verb, as most commentators<sup>57</sup> suggest on the basis of LXX, Pesh., Sym. and Vulg., to **יִנְתֵּק**, 'is torn'. This verb is used in 4:12 in the context of a cord being snapped, although a different noun is used there. The graphic change is fairly minor, but as well as suggesting the possibility of a copyists error in the MT, this might also explain why the versions differed from the original text. It must be considered as a possible emendation, but great caution should be taken, particularly in Qohelet, in implementing textual changes in order to give what seems to us to be a more satisfactory reading. The *qere*, **יִרְתֵּק**, 'bind' represents a half-way stage between the *ketibh* and the word presupposed by the versions<sup>58</sup>:

<u>Ketibh</u>	<u>Qere</u>	<u>Versions</u>
<b>יִרְחֵק</b>	<b>יִרְתֵּק</b>	<b>יִנְתֵּק</b>

It seems totally inappropriate here<sup>59</sup>.

The imperfect **וְתִרֹץ** and the niph'al **וְנִרְץ** look as though they should come from the root **רָץ**, 'run'<sup>60</sup>, which occurs on one other occasion in Qohelet, in 9:11. However, this makes no sense whatsoever in this context, and the verb **רָצַץ**, 'to crush', is much more appropriate and elsewhere displays the characteristics of an *ayin waw* verb<sup>61</sup>. There seems, then, little reason to doubt that this is the root here, but the qal is not elsewhere intransitive, as appears to be the case in this verse. Perhaps then the pointing on **תִּרֹץ** should be changed in line with **תִּרְוץ** in Ezek 29:7 and **וְנִרְץ** in the second half of the verse.

We noted above that the verb **שָׁוָה**, which occurs twice in 12:7<sup>62</sup>, is used elsewhere in Qohelet in the context of death (3:20; 5:14). 3:20-21 is of particular relevance,

<sup>57</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:196); Crenshaw (1988:188); Fox (1989:307); Whitley (1979:100).

<sup>58</sup>Schoors (1992:39-40) describes this as the most difficult example of *ketibh-qere* variation in Qohelet. He argues that it is one of only two that affect the meaning of the text (cf 9:4).

<sup>59</sup>But Gordis (1968:347) suggests, 'The Qere **יִרְתֵּק** may be a privative Niphal from **רִתּוּק**, 'chain' (1 Kgs 6:21, Qere; Ezek 7:23; **רִתְקָה**, Isa 40:19), hence 'be severed'. Cf **יִזְמַר**, Isa 5:6, 'be pruned, have the twigs (זְמוּרָה) removed', and see Ges<sup>K</sup> 67, note IV.' Fox (1989:307) responds that it 'is unlikely to be a "privative niphal" (a dubious category) from *rattoq*, "chain".'

<sup>60</sup>See, e.g., **יָרוּץ** in Hab 2:2 and **יָרַץ** in Job 16:14. Cf Schoors (1992:95).

<sup>61</sup>See **יָרוּץ** in Isa 42:4 **אֵרוּץ** in 2 Sam 22:30, and **אָרַץ** in Ps 18:30, as examples of the imperfect; and **תִּרְוּץ** in Ezek 29:7, as an example of the niphal.

<sup>62</sup>The form **וַיִּשָּׁו** in 12:7 is anomalous. For discussion, see, e.g., Schoors (1992:28).

הכל הולך אל-מקום אחד הכל היה מן-העפר והכל שב אל-העפר מי יודע רוח בני האדם העלה היא למעלה ורוח הבהמה הירדת היא למטה לארץ

12:7 appears to pick up and develop the subject of 3:20-21. The relationship between 3:20,21 and 12:7 will depend on how 3:21 is translated. We might translate the verse,

Who knows the spirit/breath of the sons of man, the ascending one - it goes upwards; and the spirit/breath of the beast, the descending one - it goes down to the earth.

This might be interpreted, 'Who knows the spirit/breath of human beings, which rises upward, or the spirit/breath of the beasts which descends downwards to the earth'<sup>63</sup>. However, as we observed in our discussion of the verse above (see on 3:21), most commentators<sup>64</sup> follow LXX, Pesh., Vulg. and Targ. and render the verse, 'Who knows *whether* the spirit/breath of man goes upward and the spirit/breath of the beast goes downwards.' This is achieved by emending the pointing of the *he* in העלה and הירדת to render it as the interrogative particle rather than as the definite article. However, this latter translation, besides requiring emendation of the text, is also in tension with 12:7, because if no-one 'knows whether the spirit/breath of man goes upward and the spirit/breath of the beast goes downward,' how can it be asserted that the spirit/breath goes back to God - which presumably is 'upwards' in light of ואתה על-הארץ in 5:1? In 3:20 it is stated quite clearly that as humans and beasts are from the dust, so they shall return to the dust, and 12:7 agrees. But 3:21 introduces at least the *possibility* that the spirit/breath of human beings might go somewhere different to that of beasts: 12:7 seems to assert that the human spirit/breath returns to God, although it makes no reference to the spirit/breath of animals. Fox (1989:308) recognises the problem when he writes,

In 3:20-21, Qohelet said that man has no advantage over the beast because no one knows whether man's life-spirit goes upward at death. In 12:7 he states that man's life-spirit goes back to God, and this must be upwards. There is indeed a contradiction here

As Fox (1989:309) acknowledges, 'the contradiction in the assumptions behind these two verses cannot be reconciled logically,' but this problem disappears if 3:21 is read in the first way we suggested above. If the latter reading is followed, however, it is necessary to attribute to the author some inconsistency at least in the images (s)he uses - although this is not without precedent in Qohelet.

<sup>63</sup>See, e.g., the reading suggested in the margin of the NIV. Also Eaton (1983:87ff).

<sup>64</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:112f); Crenshaw (1988:104); Fox (1989:196); Gordis (1968:238); Ogden (1987:62); Whybray (1989:80).



Fox (1989:308) asserts that 'the return of the life-spirit to God simply means death'. This may be the case, particularly in light of other passages which use similar imagery. Gen 2:7 states that human life started when, after God had formed Adam from the ground, he 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life' - it might be noted that this process is not recorded for animals who were simply 'formed' from the earth. Then in Gen 3:19 God says to Adam, עפר אתה ואל-עפר תשוב. Job 34:14,15 describes separation of body and spirit/breath at death thus, אם-ישים אליו לבו רוחו ונשמתו אליו יאסף יגוע כל-בשר יחד ואדם על-עפר ישוב. Similar sentiments are also expressed in Ps 104:29 in the words, תסף רוחם יגועון ואל-עפרם ישובון, and in Ps 146:4, תצא רוחו ישב לאדמתו. There does not appear to be any suggestion in these verses that the separation of body and spirit/breath means anything other than that when the body is deprived of the breath first given by God, it dies and returns to the earth from whence it came. The same may be the case in Qoh 12:7. Whybray (1989a:168) asserts:

There is no question of an entity called 'the spirit' which survives death: the two components of all living creatures, the body, which was fundamentally only dust, and the breath, which God had breathed into it giving it life, part company and cease to have separate identities.

But it might also be that the reader is expected to recall 3:20,21, and at least wonder if anything more might be intended. In this regard it is worth quoting Fox (1989:309) at greater length:

The contradiction between 12:7 and 3:21 lies in the significance they attribute to the spirit's ascent. In 3:20-21 Qohelet expresses doubt that the life-spirit rises at death but implicitly grants that this event would distinguish man's demise from mere animal death, and moreover that this ascension would save man from being *hebel*. In 12:7, on the other hand, Qohelet assumes that the spirit returns to God but takes this event to mean death and nothing more, and this assumption does not prevent a *hebel*-judgement in the next verse. *If the return of the spirit did mean something more than the extinguishing of life, some form of salvation for the individual, Qohelet would be reversing the entire pessimistic, worldly thrust of the book in one sentence without context or preparation.* [Our emphasis]

Fox grants that such a reading of 12:7 would have major consequences for our understanding of Qohelet. He contends that it would 'reverse the entire pessimistic, worldly thrust of the book', but from our examination of the book, we have seen many times that much of the material in this book may be read *either* from a pessimistic, or a more positive perspective. Might it be that the ambiguity encountered throughout the book is deliberately employed here also, so that someone who was aware of the concept of an afterlife might see an allusion to the idea in this verse<sup>65</sup>, as also in 3:21.

<sup>65</sup>Davis, e.g., (1991:316,318) reads the text in this way.

While 12:7 seems to allude to Gen 2:7 and 3:19, and to recall 3:20-21, it could also be a description of the calm after a storm, continuing the literal picture portrayed earlier in this chapter. Once the storm had passed, the dust would again settle - it would return like it was; and the wind would disappear - figuratively speaking it would return to its source. Darkness, clouds and rain were mentioned in v.2, and the following verses may picture the effects of a high wind, but until v.7 no specific reference has been made to the wind. It may, then, be more than coincidence that the word here for 'breath/spirit' is the same word used for the wind.

The balance between the two halves of the verse is disrupted by the reversal of the verb and noun in the second half:

וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעֶפֶר עַל-הָאָרֶץ כַּש־הָיָה  
וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַנָּה:

There seem to be two possible reasons for this. The fact that the balance is upset may serve to emphasise the word וְהָרוּחַ, particularly in view of the fact that the verb usually comes first in biblical Hebrew. In light of the possibilities for interpretation of the verse which we discussed above, such an emphasis is not surprising, and this may be the author's way of drawing the reader's attention to these possibilities. However, it might also simply be the author's way of indicating, in typical Hebrew style, that he has come to the end of the section. It could, of course, serve both purposes.

12:8 acts as an *inclusio* with 1:2, enclosing the main part of the book: 1:1 serving as a superscription, and 12:9-14 serving as an epilogue, or perhaps appendix, to the book. There are, however, two difference between 12:8 and 1:2 which should be noted. The first is that הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים is repeated in 1:2, but not in 12:8,

1:2	<u>הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים</u>	הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים אָמַר קָהֳלֶת
12:8	הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים	הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים אָמַר הַקֹּהֳלֶת

We might have expected an exact repetition of the opening verse, but the concluding verse seems to be in slightly condensed form. If 12:8 functions as the final verse in the passage starting at 12:1, it is possible that הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים refers *specifically* to the theme of that passage, which seems to be 'approaching death', while the expression in 1:2 might be a more general statement introducing a (the?) key theme of the book. In this case it may be that the theme of 'death' is what the whole book since 1:2 has been building up to - this is the prime example of



הבל, it is truly הבל הבלים (but is it the prime example of ‘futility’ or of ‘ephemerality’?). Already in 2:11-19; 3:18-21 and 9:1-6 death has been pictured as the great leveller, bringing wise and fool, human and beast, ultimately to the same point. There may, then, be great irony in the use of the word הבל in 12:8 following on from the use of רוח in v.7: recalling the propensity of the author of this book to use the same word in different ways and different words to convey the same thing, 12:7,8 may be interpreted to say that when one dies his/her body returns to the earth from which it came, and his/her breath returns to God whence it came so that it might truly be said of life that it is all but breath. Similar sentiments are found in Job 7:7, <sup>66</sup>זכר כי-רוח חיי.

The second difference we should note between 12:8 and 1:2, is the use of the definite form of קהלת:

1:2	הבל הבלים אמר	קהלת	הבל הבלים הכל הבל
12:8	הבל הבלים אמר	<u>הקהלת</u>	הכל הבל

We noted in our discussion of 1:2 that קהלת occurs three times in the book, and on each occasion the expression is slightly different. Only here is the word definite and it suggests that the term is used as a title rather than a name. Perhaps in 1:2 the author adopted the title as a name, and wrote as if he were that person (whom he seems to equate with, or at least model on, King Solomon). But by this stage in the book (and possibly also by 7:27) he has put aside this ‘royal fiction’, as it is often called, and regards הקהלת as a person distinct from himself. In the early stages of the book it served his purposes to write *as if* he was the person who was modelled on King Solomon - the epitome of a wise and wealthy person - in order to present an authoritative evaluation of wisdom and wealth, but having shown these things to have limited value he drops the facade<sup>67</sup>.

## 16.2 Conclusions

11:8-12:8 opens with an exhortation to the reader to make the most of his/her youth. This is a fitting conclusion to the verses scattered throughout the book that issue the ‘call to enjoyment’. However, the rest of the passage urges that one’s approaching death also be borne in mind, when the pleasures of youth will no longer be available. The passage, and the

<sup>66</sup>The second half of Job 7:7 are also highly pertinent to Qohelet, it reads, לא-תשוב עיני לראות טוב.

<sup>67</sup>Cf Fox’s Excursus III (1989:311-321).

book within the inclusio, ends with a description of death, when dust returns to dust and one's breath/spirit returns to God. We have seen throughout the book that the reader may respond in very different ways to the description of the things that happen and what is done 'under the sun', and at the end of the book the most difficult question of all is posed to those who search for 'meaning' in life: how do you respond to the fact of death? This issue has been close to the surface throughout much of the book, and has surfaced a few times, and here as elsewhere a considerable gap is left which the reader must attempt to fill in as (s)he attempts to find 'meaning' in the book of Qohelet, and, indeed, in life. Of course, the matter is considerably complicated by the difficulty of 12:1-7 which seem to describe approaching death - but, as is amply evidenced by the many different interpretations offered by the commentators, it is not at all obvious how this description operates. It seems that the passage can be read at various levels, from a literal account of a household running down as the occupants grow old, to a symbolic description of the increasing frailty of old age as death approaches, to the anticipation of a great calamity using eschatological imagery. Typical of Qohelet, none of these readings is wholly satisfactory, and the relationship of the 'household imagery' in 12:3,4a to the images drawn from nature in vv.4b,5 is especially difficult.

Nonetheless, the different readings do reflect different responses to approaching death: is it a cataclysmic event in which the whole world seems to collapse; is it something which happens to everyone and ought just to be accepted as inevitable; or is it the end of one's appointed time after which one's breath/spirit returns to God - whatever that might mean?



## CHAPTER 17, The Epilogue (12:9-14)

### 16.1 Commentary

This section is usually regarded as consisting of two epilogues, both commencing with וִיתֵר. However, commentators are divided about what precisely the role of this word is in vv.9,12. There are basically two positions:

- 1) It is an adverb, as elsewhere in Qohelet, which with -שׁ means something like, 'in addition to'<sup>1</sup>. The first half of the verse would then recall the rest of the book, and the second half add the new information: 'In addition to being wise, Qohelet also taught the people knowledge ...'. The word עוֹד is then part of the phrase, ...וִיתֵר שׁ-עוֹד ..., 'in addition to ... also ...'.
- 2) It is a conjunction indicating that the following is an addition to the book, which ends at 12:8<sup>2</sup>. This might suggest that an editor is signalling an addition to the original material, or it may be that the author is informing the reader that (s)he is adding additional information to the book: perhaps as explanation, or perhaps as an after-thought. This would be in keeping with Mishnaic usage.

A factor in favour of the second reading in the case of 12:9 is the disjunctive *zaqeph gadol* above וִיתֵר, which suggests that it is to be read as separate from the following. We should note, however, that the accent does not occur in the same place in v.12. A second factor against the first reading, and in favour of the second, is the absence of the comparative *mem* which is used in Mishnaic Hebrew. We should note again, though, that the *mem* is present in v.12. It may be, then, that וִיתֵר serves a different function in the two verses, meaning 'in addition' or 'moreover' in v.9, and 'in addition to' or 'more than' in v.12. Such variation in word usage is characteristic of Qohelet, and might indicate, firstly, that it is the author of the rest of the book who has appended these final verses, and, secondly, that there is one appendix rather than two.

There are, however, two factors which may suggest that we read וִיתֵר in v.9 in the first way suggested above. Firstly, the second reading accounts but poorly for the particle of relation, -שׁ. This particle has a wide range of meanings in the Hebrew Bible, often serving

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:190, but see his translation on p.189); Fox (1989:322); Ogden (1987:208).

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:197,199); Gordis (1968:351-352); Whybray (1989:170).

merely to link a clause to that which precedes it. Such would need to be the case here, but the verse would make good sense, and be more simple, without it - and its purpose would have been served more effectively by the use of **כי** as elsewhere in Qohelet. Moreover, in the Mishna **יתר** is used with **ש-** in the sense of 'beyond the fact that...', although it uses the *mem* as well, **יתר מש-**. Secondly, the particle of relation is often directly preceded in Qohelet by a *zaqeph*.

**יתרון** and its cognates, **יתר** and **מותר**, seem to be an important element in Qohelet: particularly considering the question in 1:3, **מה-יתרון לאדם בכל-עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש**, which directly follows **הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הכל הבל** in 1:2, just as **ויתר** at the start of 12:9 follows **הבל הבלים אמר הקוהלת הכל הבל** in 12:8. It may be that the use of **יתר** in 12:9,12 is intended to pick up on this question. On this basis, and because of the difference in the way **ויתר** seems to be used in 12:9,12, and because it divides the (one) epilogue into two equal halves (37 words in each), one of which centres on Qohelet and one of which centres on God, we proposed above the following division of 12:8-14:

FIRST HALF	
<b>ויתר שהיה קהלת חכם</b>	intro. - 4 words
<b>עוד למד-דעת את-העם ואון וחקר תקן משלים הרבה</b>	10 words
<b>בקש קהלת למצא דברי-חפץ וכתוב ישר דברי אמת</b>	centre - 9 words
<b>דבר חכמים כדרבנות וכמשמרות נטועים בעלי אספות נתנו מרעה אחד</b>	10 words
<b>ויתר מהמה בני הזהר</b>	concl. - 4 words
SECOND HALF	
<b>עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ ולהג הרבה יגעת בשר סוף דבר הכל נשמע</b>	13 words
<b>את-האלהים ירא ואת-מצותיו שמור כי-זה כל-האדם</b>	centre - 10 words
<b>כי את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל-נעלם אם-טוב ואם-רע</b>	14 words

**ויתר** at the beginning and end of the first half intentionally picks up on the question in 1:3. The word occurs in exactly the same form as it does in the question **מה-יתר לאדם** in 1:3. The word occurs in exactly the same form as it does in the question **מה-יתר לאדם** in 6:11 - the last time that question is asked - and offers the author's final words on the matter. But typical of Qohelet the word is used differently on each occasion, and both are different to **יתרון** in 1:3 (and 2:11,13,13; 3:9; 5:8,15; 7:12; 10:10), but also to **יתר** in 7:11, and **יותר** in 2:15; 6:8; and 7:16. Thus the question the reader has to address is not simply what **יתר** (or **יותר** or **מותר** or **יתרון**) a person can gain, but what the author might intend by his or her use of the word in any instance.

The word **חכם** appears in v.9 and **חכמים** in v.11, but commentators are divided over what precisely these terms denote. It does not seem that **חכם** earlier in the book denotes any



thing other than 'a wise person', but it may be that it means 'a sage', perhaps a professional wisdom teacher, in this context<sup>3</sup>. This gains support from the description of Qohelet's activities that follows in v.9, and also the contrast with **הָעֵם** which occurs in the same position in the next clause. If this is the case, it would appear to contradict the assertion in 1:1 that Qohelet was a king in Jerusalem. Perhaps, the author here reveals his true identity, and finally lays to rest the so-called 'royal fiction' with which he started the book. Alternatively, the author may simply be reiterating what Qohelet had said about him- or herself early in the book - that (s)he was wise<sup>4</sup>.

Commentators disagree over the meaning of the word **וְאִזֵּן**. There seem to be two possible ways of reading the word:

- 1) It may be connected with the noun **אֹזֶן**, 'ear', and bear a meaning similar to the common hiphil verb from this root meaning 'give ear, listen, hear'<sup>5</sup>.
- 2) It may be connected with the reasonably common noun **מֵאֲזֵנִים**, 'scales', and mean something similar to the Aramaic verb **אִזַּן**, 'weigh [up]'<sup>6</sup>.

If it is the latter, it is the only occurrence of the verb in the Hebrew Bible. If it is the former, it is the only example of the piel of a verb which occurs elsewhere in the hiphil. The main reason for adopting the latter explanation is that it offers a better parallel to **וַחֲקֵר תִּקֶּן**. However, the former might recall 1:8, **וְלֹא-תִמְלֹא אֹזֶן מִשְׁמַע**, and also tie in with 12:13 which states, **סוּף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע**. Moreover, it would accord well with the sentiments Prov 1:5-6, **יִשְׁמַע חֲכָם וְיוֹסֵף לִקְחַת וּנְבוֹן תַּחְבִּלוֹת יִקְנֶה לְהַבִּין מִשָּׁל וּמְלִיצָה דְּבַרֵּי חֲכָמִים וַחֲדָתָם**.

12:9 sees the only occurrence in Qohelet of the word **מִשָּׁל**, 'proverb, parable'. However, twice the verb **מָשַׁל**, 'rule, have dominion', is used (9:17; 10:4), though it is probably from a separate root. **מִשָּׁלִים** in this verse has been taken to refer to the book of Proverbs<sup>7</sup>, at least some of which is ascribed to Solomon, and which has his name in its superscription (Prov 1:1, cf 10:1 and 25:1). But it probably refers more generally to Qohelet's work, and may be an allusion to Solomon, of whom it is said **וַיְדַבֵּר שְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים מִשָּׁל**.

<sup>3</sup>Cf, e.g., Crenshaw (1988:190); Fox (1989:322); Gordis (1968:352); Ogden (1987:208).

<sup>4</sup>Cf, e.g., Barton (1912:197); Whybray (1989:170).

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:323); Whitley (1979:102).

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:199); Crenshaw (1988:190); Gordis (1968:352); Ogden (1987:208); Whybray (1989:170).

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:197). Cf Sheppard (1977).

The word הרבה is used often throughout Qohelet, and is a feature also of the epilogue, occurring here and twice in v.12. The emphasis in this section on דברים, and the mention here of משלים הרבה, may recall 5:6 and 6:11:

כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים כי את-האלהים ירא 5:6  
כי יש דברים הרבה מרבים הבל מה-יתר לאדם 6:11

These verses and the phrase עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ do not seem to be designed to give the reader a great deal of confidence even in Qohelet's words.

The person Qohelet is very much the focus of vv.9,10, having appeared only rarely elsewhere in the book (1:1,2; 7:27). (S)he is greatly praised in these verses, which lends support to those commentators who argue that this section was written later to give him/her credence<sup>8</sup>: whether it was written by the author of the rest of the book, or perhaps by a disciple or follower. Qohelet is specifically mentioned in vv.9,10, but not in vv.11-14. Considering the attention (s)he receives in these first two verses, it is possible that מרעה אחד at the end of v.11 refers to him or her also. However, while קהלת is mentioned twice in this section, האלהים is mentioned twice in the next, and מרעה אחד might also refer to him.

The emphasis moves in v.10 from Qohelet him-/herself to Qohelet's words. This might refer specifically to the words written in this book, especially in light of the first verse of the book, דברי קהלת בן-דוד מלך בירושלם. There are two descriptions of these words, דברי אמת and דברי-חפץ. These expressions might *both* describe the words of Qohelet (in general, or in this book), or the first half of the verse could describe what (s)he sought to do, and the second what (s)he ended up doing: 'Qohelet sought to find pleasing words, *and* uprightly wrote words of truth;' or 'Qohelet *sought* to find pleasing words, *but* (s)he uprightly *wrote* words of truth [however unpleasant they might be].'

V.11 would seem to favour the second reading, and it would also seem to be a truer description of the book of Qohelet - at least some of which hardly fulfils the description of 'pleasing words'. However, which reading is followed will depend to some extent on how the word כתוב is understood. Although 'words' and 'speaking' are referred to often in Qohelet, the verb כתב, 'to write', is used only here. The passive participle in MT (supported by LXX)

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:197); Crenshaw (1988:190); Fox (1989:316-319); Gordis (1968:349-350); Ogden (1987:208); Whybray (1989:169)



seems awkward<sup>9</sup>. It must mean something like, 'that which is written honestly are the words of truth' (along similar lines to ככתוב in 2 Chr 30:5), which could mean either of the above, or that while *Qohelet* sought pleasing words, what is honestly written [by other people] are words of truth: '*Qohelet* sought to find pleasing words, *but* what is honestly written are words of truth [however unpleasant they might be].'

However, commentators usually emend the word either to the infinitive absolute<sup>10</sup>, which would require little change and would continue the sense of the infinitive (see also Qoh 8:9 and Ges<sup>K</sup>, 113y,z) to give a reading equivalent to the first one above: 'Qohelet sought to find pleasing words, *and* honestly to write words of truth;' or emend it to the third person perfect<sup>11</sup>, which would allow for either of the two readings. Perhaps, despite its awkwardness, the passive participle is more in keeping with the ambiguity we have observed throughout this book.

דברי אמת and דברי-חפץ, with which v.11 opens, probably follows on from דברי חכמים in the previous verse. דברי חכמים occurs on only one other occasion in *Qohelet*, in 9:17 where we read, דברי חכמים בנחת נשמעים מוזקת מושל בכסילים. However, a similar expression is used in 10:11, דברי פי-חכם חן ושפתות כסיל תבלענו. In both cases the 'wise' are opposed to the 'fools', and there is no indication that a special class of 'sages' is indicated. But this is hardly conclusive in light of *Qohelet*'s propensity for using words with different meanings. The same expression occurs in Prov 22:17,18 whose sentiments tie in well with Qoh 12:9-11, הט אצנך ושמע דברי חכמים ולבך תשית לדעתי כי-נעים כי תשמרם בבטנך.

There are no other words besides משמרות attested in the Hebrew Bible from a root שמר. However, a root סמר, 'bristle up' occurs seven times, and the noun מסמר, 'nail', which occurs in Isa 41:7; Jer 10:4; 1 Chr 22:3; and 2 Chr 3:9<sup>12</sup>, would provide a good parallel to 'goad'<sup>13</sup>. We have already noticed that שכלות in 1:17 may be the same word as סכלות from the root סכל, elsewhere in the book (2:3,12,13; 7:25; 10:1,13).

The word אספות does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. It is from the root אסף, which is used with its usual meaning of 'gather, collect' in Qoh 2:26. Although it refers

<sup>9</sup>Schoors (1992:45-6,169-70).

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:323-324); Gordis (1968:353); Schoors (1992:45-6); Whitley (1979:102).

<sup>11</sup>E.g., Whybray (1989:171). Most commentators acknowledge this possibility also.

<sup>12</sup>See also Jer 51:27; Ps 119:120; Job 4:15.

<sup>13</sup>But Galling (1950) renders the word 'scepters'.

to gathered people in Sanh 12a, as does the similar word אספה in Isa 24:22, it may refer in Qoh 12:11 to the collected writings or sayings of the wise. The plural אספים, found in Neh 12:25 and 1 Chr 16:15,17<sup>14</sup>, which is identical to our word apart from the masculine ending, seems to indicate gathered objects rather than people.

The word בעל has a wide range of meanings, and on the basis of its use in Gen 14:13 and Neh 6:18, Barton (1912:197,200) suggests the reading ‘members of’ here, indicating the *words* which are ‘members of collections [of proverbs]’. However, Fox (1989:322) points out that ‘the meaning in those verses is not quite the same, because participants in a covenant may be said to be *be‘alim* in the sense that they “possess” it’; and Whybray (1989a:172) notes that ‘there is some doubt whether the word can be used in this sense of inanimate objects.’ It seems best, then, to read the word in its usual sense, and to render the phrase ‘masters of collections’. It may be that ‘masters’ has the sense of ‘owners’, or perhaps of ‘experts’, a meaning it seems to bear in Mishnaic Hebrew in expressions like בעל מקרא, ‘experts in scripture’. The former is more appropriate in the use of בעל in 5:10,12; 7:12 and 8:8, where it seems quite specifically to refer to the ‘possessor’ of certain objects or a particular trait; either could apply to בעל הכנפים used to describe a bird in 10:20, and לבעל הלשון used in 10:11 to describe a snake charmer.

However, rendering the phrase in this way does not provide an adequate parallel for דברי חכמים at the beginning of 12:11. For this reason, Fox (1989:324) argues that there is an ellipsis here, and that דברי from 11aα is implied. This seems reasonable, particularly when the same word in the first halves of 10:12,13 may be implied in the second halves of these verses. This would give a balanced chiasmus, thus:

A'	B'	B	A
[דברי] בעלי אספות	וכמשמרות נטועים	כדרבנות	דברי חכמים

However, while this may be the meaning of the first half of the verse, we should observe that the chiasmus can be balanced without any additions, if we assume that אספות refers to a collection of words, and בעלי are those responsible for these words:

A'	B'	C'	C	B	A
אספות	בעלי	וכמשמרות נטועים	כדרבנות	חכמים	דברי

<sup>14</sup>See also 2 Chr 25:24.



In addition, there is a chiasmus in the endings of the first six words, which may draw attention to the word **אספות**:

[אספות]	בעלי	נטועים	וכמשמרות	כדרבנות	חכמים	דברי

We should also note that as well as 'words' being like 'goads' in terms of the function they serve, the two roots **דבר** and **דרב** are also very similar. The same similarity is not displayed in the second half of the chiasmus, but there may be an intentional alliteration between **נטועים** and **נתנו מ-**.

The final clause of v.11 presents no problems of translation, but its interpretation is more complicated. The problem lies in discerning who the 'one shepherd', **מרעה אחד**, indicates. There seem to be three options: 1) God<sup>15</sup>; 2) Qohelet; 3) a literal shepherd<sup>16</sup>. The first is favoured by most commentators because the epithet 'shepherd' is often used of God in the Hebrew Bible<sup>17</sup>, so this seems to be an obvious association for the reader to make. However, there are three problems that commentators highlight. Firstly, the ascription of the words of the wise, or perhaps the wisdom writers, ultimately to God goes beyond anything found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>18</sup>. Of course, it is possible that if Qohelet is a late book, or if the epilogue is late, this may indicate a stage in the process of the canonisation of the wisdom literature<sup>19</sup>. It is also possible that it is not the **אספות** which are given, but the **בעלי** - in this case God may have given 'experts' to teach people with these collections, in the same way that he raised up judges and prophets. Secondly, the word **אחד** would seem to emphasise the 'oneness' of God, and there seems to be no reason why such an assertion of monotheism should be introduced into the book at this stage<sup>20</sup>. However, it may be that 'one' is used in contrast to the plurals **חכמים** and **בעלי** to show that while the words were written by a number of wise people, they ultimately came from one source. And thirdly, 'shepherd' is usually applied to

<sup>15</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:198); Davidson (1986:89); Eaton (1983:158); Gordis (1968:354); Loader (1986:134).

<sup>16</sup>E.g., Fox (1989:325).

<sup>17</sup>E.g., Gen 49:24; Isa 40:11; Ps 23:1; 80:2; 95:7.

<sup>18</sup>So Crenshaw (1988:191).

<sup>19</sup>Wilson (1984:175) comments, 'I consider the epilogue a canonical statement appended in order to instruct the reader of faith how to read and understand Qohelet.' He adds later, 'I feel there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the epilogue serves to bind Qohelet together with Proverbs and provides a canonical key to the interpretation of both.' Cf Sheppard (1977:187-9).

<sup>20</sup>So Fox (1989:325); Whybray (1989:172).

God in his capacity as keeper and protector, which seems not to be relevant here<sup>21</sup>. However, it may be that the author has adopted a well-known metaphor for God *because* it is well-known rather than for the attributes of God it portrays.

The main reason for supposing that מרעה אחד represents Qohelet is that (s)he is the primary focus in vv.9,10. Also at least the first occurrence of the word דברי, and probably the second, in v.10 refer to words given by Qohelet. But 'the one shepherd' seems to have given דברי חכמים (= דברי בעלי אספות?), which refers to the words of more than one person. Moreover, there seems to be no good reason why this epithet should be used of Qohelet in this context.

Fox (1989:325) argues,

The fact that 'shepherd' and 'goads' belong to one domain shows that the vehicle of the simile is continuing and the clause *nittenu mero'eh 'ehad* has meaning as something an actual shepherd can do ... it is better to take as the subject of *nittenu* not the distant 'words of the sages', but the immediately preceding nouns, *darbonot/masmrot neta'im*, the goads/nail that a shepherd 'gives' or 'puts' in the sense that he prods his herd with them.

However, these nouns do *not* immediately precede this clause, and it seems better still to take אספות (= דברי), which does immediately precede נתנו, as the subject of that verb. Thus it is the 'collections [of words]' which are given by the shepherd - hardly an activity usually associated with a literal shepherd. Perhaps the expression is used because of the terms associated with shepherding earlier in the verse, and because it is ambiguous, giving a very different reading of the verse depending how it is understood. It also affects how the following expression is read - does it mean that one should beware of anything beyond Qohelet's words, or the words of the wise, or the words given by one shepherd? Or does it point forward to the making of many books and much study? The ambiguity is probably intentional, allowing the phrase to function in several ways, and to act as a link between the two halves of the passage.

The rest of v.12 is in the form of a proverb with two balanced halves, although they contain different numbers of words:

<u>negative conclusion</u>	<u>much/many</u>	<u>infinitive verb?</u>
אין קץ	הרבה	עשות ספרים
יגעת בשר	הרבה	ולג

The two clauses appear to relate to the activities ascribed to Qohelet in the previous section: עשות ספרים describes the same activity as כתוב in v.10, and perhaps משלים הרבה in v.9;

<sup>21</sup>So Fox (1989:325).



and **להג** seems to describe the same activity as **און** and **חקר** in v.9, and **בקש ... למצא** in v.10. The emphasis seems to be on practising these activities to excess (see also 2:15; 7:16), because **הרבה** is the only word common to both halves. Again this does little to encourage the reader about the value of what Qohelet has undertaken, particularly when the repeated word here, **הרבה**, is also used in connection with his/her activity in v.9. However, it is not necessarily a negative evaluation of these activities, so much as a statement that they are never-ending, implying that one could expend all his or her energies in these pursuits and still not find the answers (s)he sought. This reading might be contradicted by the clause, **סוף דבר הכל נשמע**, which follows it, depending on how this clause is understood. Perhaps the implication is also that no matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to add to the wisdom 'given by the one shepherd'.

The use of the word **דבר** here is very appropriate. **דברי** is the first word in Qohelet, so it gives a sense of completeness to find the word also at the end of the book, particularly as part of a closing phrase, **סוף דבר**. Moreover, the root **דבר** is used regularly throughout the book. Often the word is ambiguous, because it could mean either 'word' or 'matter', and such is the case here also. Some commentators note that the absence of an article is strange: if the expression **סוף דבר** means '*the* end of *the* matter', as most commentators believe, we should expect **דבר** to take the article. The use, or lack, of the article is unusual on a number of occasions in this book, but perhaps in this instance the author intends to draw attention to the word. If, instead of adding the article to the beginning, the plural was added to the end, the reader might see in the word a reference to the three occurrences of **דברי** in vv.10,11. Might it be, perhaps, that the author intends the reader to consider this possibility - particularly in light of 7:8, **טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו**? We should note that although 'words' are treated very positively in 12:10-11, the author's attitude towards **דבר**, be it 'word' or 'thing' is somewhat ambivalent earlier in the book. In 1:8 it is stated that **כל-הדברים יגעים לא-יוכל איש לדבר**; 1:10 then adds, **יש דבר שיאמר ראה-זה חדש הוא כבר היה לעלמים אשר היה מלפננו**. 5:1-6 is a sustained attack on the careless use of words, employing such phrases as:

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>ולבך אל-ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים</b> | v.1 |
| <b>יהיו דברים מעטים</b>                    | v.1 |
| <b>וקול כסיל ברב דברים</b>                 | v.2 |
| <b>כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים הרבה</b>     | v.6 |

6:11 claims, **לכל-הדברים אשר ידברו אל-תתן לבך** 7:21 warns **כי יש דברים הרבה מרבים הבל**; and 8:1 seems to say that no-one knows the interpretation of words anyway: **ומי יודע פשר דבר**. 9:16 asserts that the words of a poor wise person are not heeded, **ודבריו אינם נשמעים**, and 9:17 adds that the words of the wise are heard in quietness, **דברי חכמים בנחת נשמעים**, which could be deeply ironical. 10:13,14 then reiterates a theme found earlier, saying of the many words a fool produces, **תחלת דברי-פיהו סכלות ואחרית פיהו הוללות רעה והסכל ירבה דברים**. However, 10:12 is much more in line with 12:10-11 when it commends the words of the wise, **דברי פי-חכם חן**. Also 3:7 specifically states that there is a time for speaking, **עת לדבר**; and 8:5 states, **שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע**.

While **דבר** occurs in the first verse of Qohelet, **הכל** appears in 1:2, and then regularly thereafter - some 24 times throughout the book (1:2,14; 2:11,16,17; 3:1,11,19,19,20,20,20; 5:8; 6:6; 7:15; 9:1,2,2,3; 10:3,19; 11:5; 12:8,13). This emphasises the thoroughness of the task the author undertook, and the comprehensiveness of the survey of 'everything' under the sun. Indeed, definite and indefinite forms of this word together occur a total of 91 times, an average of well over one every three verses. The word here, then, is appropriate as part of a summary of, or conclusion to, the book. In its context, it may serve more than one purpose - linking back to 'all' that has been related earlier in Qohelet, but also relating specifically to **דברי חכמים** in v.11, to which **ויתר מהמה בני הזהר** in v.12 may refer: if one should beware of anything beyond these, perhaps it is because 'everything has been heard'. We should note that **כל** is emphasised in these final two verses of Qohelet by being used twice in each of 12:13,14.

The phrase **את-האלהים ירא** in this context may well recall the statement found in Pss. and Prov. (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10) that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom<sup>22</sup>. The idea of 'fear of God' is another theme which recurs a number of times in Qohelet and seems to be an important thread in the book. 3:14 states that God acts in order to engender fear. 5:6 seems to recommend fear of God rather than many words and dreams. 7:18 appears to imply that those who fear God have a particular understanding of righteousness and wickedness, or in

<sup>22</sup>Wilson (1984:181) argues,

Proverbs cites 'the fear of YHWH' as the *beginning* of wisdom, while for Qohelet the 'end of the matter' is that one's whole duty is to 'fear God and keep his commandments.' So 'fear of YHWH/God' is the origin and culmination of true wisdom, the principle that governs the right understanding of 'the words of the wise[men]' collected for instruction. The movement is one to place the 'words of the wise[men]' within a larger context bound at beginning and end by the 'fear of YHWH/God.' [His emphasis]



some way escape from excesses of both righteousness and wickedness. 8:12-13 indicates that things will go well for those who fear God, and badly for those who do not. But perhaps the most notable feature of all these verses is that it is far from clear how they should be understood. There are major difficulties of interpretation in each case, which means that more than one reading of each is possible. When added to the fact that ירא can indicate either reverent awe, or just plain terror, the reader may be left wondering what precisely the author intends to convey by this expression.

Only here and in 8:5 is the word מצוה used. The combination of 'fear of God' and 'observing his laws' gives this verse a very orthodox appearance, although nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible are the two phrases actually brought together (but see Sir 1:25-26<sup>23</sup>). Some commentators have seen in this exhortation a conventional philosophy which is out of keeping with the tenor of the rest of the book<sup>24</sup>. However, if their assessment of the earlier chapters is correct, or at least a viable interpretation, they need not, on that basis, conclude that these are the words of a different writer: if the reader questions what the author means by the phrase ירא, (s)he may also question whether an exhortation to obey God's commandments is out of reverence or whether it is simply a matter of pragmatism.

The final clause of this verse, כי-זה כל-האדם, is difficult because it seems to be incomplete. It may be an idiom, the precise meaning of which is now lost to us - perhaps 'this is *the case for everyone*', or 'this *applies to everyone*': we find such apparently incomplete phrases elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ps 109:4; 110:3; 120:7). Or it is possible that the author left it incomplete so that the reader is forced to decide for him- or herself what it should mean. As Fox (1989:328) points out, it seems that 'the phrase in Qohelet is elliptical, but it is not clear how the ellipsis is to be completed'.

V.14 contains a number of words which have played important roles in the earlier chapters. The word כל, we noted above, is very prolific and it conveys a sense of the comprehensiveness of the task the author undertook. עשה is also a key word which is used in

<sup>23</sup>Sheppard (1977:186) maintains, 'although the statement in v13 in connection with v14 is foreign to Proverbs and Qoheleth, it is surprising like the ideology of wisdom in Sirach!' He goes on to say (1977:187),

In sum, we find that only Sirach has exactly the same ideology as Qoh 12:13-14, a perspective not expressed in the body of Qoheleth itself. We must conclude that the redactor of Qoh 12:13-14 either knew of Sirach or shared fully in a similar pervasive estimate of sacred wisdom.

<sup>24</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:192); Loader (1986:135).

every chapter of the book and is used both of God's deeds and of human deeds. Indeed, 'all the deeds', or 'all that is done', is mentioned on nine previous occasions: five times it specifically refers to what is done 'under the sun' (1:13,14; 8:9; 9:3,6); on two other occasions it is human deeds that are referred to (2:11; 3:17); and twice it refers to God's deeds (3:14; 8:17). On four occasions we find את-מעשה or את-כל-מעשה without the article, but each time מעשה is in construct relationship with a following word:

את-מעשה ידיך	5:5
את-מעשה האלהים	7:13
את-כל-מעשה האלהים	8:17
את-מעשה האלהים	11:5

These last three are particularly pertinent to our verse, and may, indeed, explain the absence of the article in 12:14:

את- מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו	7:13 ראה
את-כל-מעשה האלהים כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא	8:17 וראיתי
את- מעשה האלהים אשר יעשה את-הכל	11:5 לא תדע
את-כל-מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט	12:14 כי

In each case, apart from 12:14, it is specifically the deeds of God that are mentioned - and, in fact, the same point is made each time: they are beyond human ability to comprehend or change. It may be that 12:14 is deliberately designed to allude to these earlier verses, even though the deeds referred to are presumably human deeds and *not* God's deeds. This is enhanced by the fact that the usual Hebrew word order of verb-subject is reversed in the second clause - which serves also to emphasise האלהים.

האלהים, again, is an important theme in the book, although the word occurs less often than כל and עשה - forty times in total. אלהים occurs in every chapter except for ch.10. It is, of course, significant that the book in its present form ends with a reference to God - it is also significant that the text within the inclusio ends with a reference to God (12:7).

The expression יבא במשפט also recalls an important theme in Qohelet, which has a considerable bearing on the interpretation of the book as a whole even though 'judgment' is only explicitly mentioned seven times. Following the observation in 3:16 that wickedness is done in the place(s) of justice and righteousness, the author states in 3:17 that God will judge, אמרתי אני בלבי את-הצדיק ואת-הרשע ישפט האלהים. 5:7 also notes that people are deprived of justice and righteousness, and the poor are oppressed, אם-עשק רש וגזל משפט וצדק תראה, 8:5,6 seem again to assert that there is a time for judgment, and 8:5 also refers to observance



of commands, שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם כי לכל חפץ יש עת ומשפט. And again in 11:9 we find an assertion that God will bring everything to judgment, using the same words that are used in 12:14, ודע כי על-כל-אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט. We should recall that after a chapter which emphasises what people do *not* know, 11:9 exhorts the reader to know this one fact, a fact which also appears in the conclusion in 12:13,14.

It seems, then, that the author says two things about judgment/justice: firstly, (s)he observes that justice, at least sometimes, is not seen to be done; but, secondly, (s)he asserts that God will judge everyone - the righteous and the evil, the one who takes full advantage of his/her youth, the good and bad deeds of everyone. How is the reader to understand these two statements? Some commentators<sup>25</sup> have resorted to viewing the observation of injustice as the writer's own view, and the assertions of God's judgment as the view of a glossator, probably the same one who wrote 12:11-14. However, the treatment of issues in this book seems often to be addressed from different perspectives which, if not actually contradictory, are at least in tension with one another, so that if we implement this strategy of assigning one strand to the author and the other to an editor there would be very little of the book left intact. A more plausible explanation is that the author relates what (s)he observes and states what (s)he believes (or perhaps thinks (s)he *ought* to believe), fully aware of the tension between the two. It may be that (s)he has no answer to the problem, or it may be that (s)he is trying to guide the reader to find the answer for him- or herself. In this instance, one possible solution is that there is a judgment which takes place after death - but whether or not the author hints at this, (s)he certainly does not state it explicitly.

נעלם probably comes from the root עלם meaning 'conceal'. If this is the case it may be the only word from this root, although it is possible that העלם in 3:11 is from the same root. However, נעלם recalls the word עולם, from another root עלם, which is important in Qohelet. The fact that a different root is used here is not surprising in view of the way our author often seems to play on the various meanings of a word/root.

Again טוב and רע are important words in Qohelet. The words do not often occur in the same verse (only in 4:3,8; 7:3,14; 8:12 and 12:14), and in 9:2 where we find a series of paired opposites, טוב appears alone as though רע has been omitted.

<sup>25</sup>E.g., Barton (1912:199).

## 17.2 Conclusions

It seems that whoever wrote these final verses - and there is insufficient reason, in view of the similarities of style and vocabulary between these verses and the earlier chapters, for assuming they were written by someone other than the author of the rest of the book - has deliberately picked up on important words from Qohelet and drawn them together to form his/her conclusion. Contrary to what some commentators assert<sup>26</sup>, there is in fact nothing in this final section which is alien to the rest of the book. But neither does it solve any of the questions which were raised earlier in the book. Superficially it certainly gives the impression of an orthodox ending to Qohelet, but when studied carefully, it actually raises as many questions as it answers. The author *may* intend the words to be taken at face value, and the book to be understood in light of them: (s)he *may* also intend them to be deeply ironical.

Perhaps the major area of ambiguity concerning the epilogue is precisely that it is an epilogue. Because these words are added after the inclusio; because they refer to the person Qohelet in the third person, and describe him/her in terms more appropriate to some kind of adviser or counsellor than to a king; and because they *appear* to present very orthodox theology, they raise a number of important questions. Are they written by the same person as the rest of the book? If so, does this person now drop the façade and reveal him- or herself as an adviser of some sort rather than a king? Or is 1:2-12:8 presented by the author as the words of Qohelet, whom (s)he now shows to be someone other than her-/himself? And if this is the case, what attitude does the author adopt to Qohelet's words - approval or disapproval? Or does the author hope the reader will respond in a certain way to Qohelet's words, while (s)he is unable in the epilogue to give full assent to them, feeling duty-bound to give the book an orthodox conclusion? Or does the author intend by the epilogue to guide the reader towards the 'correct' interpretation of Qohelet's words? If the epilogue is not by the same person, is it written by someone who approves of the book, and wishes to give it more credence by expressing approval of the person Qohelet and appending an orthodox conclusion so that the book will be acceptable? Or is it written by someone who disapproves of Qohelet and hopes to subdue the unorthodoxy of the book (perhaps also making similar additions elsewhere)? Or is it written by someone who wants to ensure that the book is read in an 'appropriate' way? It

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<sup>26</sup>E.g., Crenshaw (1988:192); Loader (1986:135).



may be that 12:9-14 are presented as an epilogue precisely because they allow for such varied interpretation, thus denying the reader the luxury of a straightforward conclusion to the book, but requiring him/her even here to employ his/her own critical abilities to fill in the gaps concerning the possible meaning of these verses and how they might relate to the rest of the book.

## CHAPTER 18, The Conclusion

With the possible exception of the Song of Songs, the book of Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth), is unique in the Old Testament in having been interpreted in a variety of ways, some of these in direct opposition to others. In the past hundred years, for example, it has been described, on the one hand, as "Das Hohelied der Skepsis" by Heinrich Heine<sup>1</sup>, while at the other end of the scale Franz Delitzsch considered it to be "Das Hohelied der Gottesfurcht"<sup>2</sup>. Earlier this century M. Jastrow Jr.<sup>3</sup> gave his commentary on it the title "A gentle Cynic" and, more recently, H.W. Hertzberg<sup>4</sup> has gone so far as to describe it as "...die erschütterndste messianische Weissagung, die das Alte Testament aufzuweisen hat". These quotations draw attention to the extremes of opinion held as to the book and its contents.

It should not be thought, however, that this variety of opinion is merely the result of the critical scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries. It might be said that the book of Ecclesiastes has divided scholarly opinion throughout its existence, and the controversy which accompanied the inclusion of the book in the Jewish canon (c.100 A.D.) a summary of which is recorded in the Midrashim and Talmud, simply underlines this. This division among the Rabbis throws into relief just where the problems of interpretation lie; in effect one side is saying that the orthodox and pious statements in the book modify and control the unorthodox, while the other side claims that the scepticism is of the essence of Qoheleth and remains over against the pious statements to be found there.

Thus Salters (1988:44) sums up what many commentators had previously and a number have since observed about the history of interpretation of Qoheleth<sup>5</sup>. And the controversy continues unabated, as commentaries and other books and journal articles on Qoheleth continue to appear which present very different, often diametrically opposed, interpretations of the book. Ogden is representative of a number of commentators<sup>6</sup> when he claims of Qoheleth (1987:14-5) that,

Its thesis, then, is that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery ... Qoheleth's purpose, then, may be defined as calling on the next generation to ponder deeply the kinds of life issues to which there seem to be no complete answers, while at the same time holding firm, and positively accepting, life as God gives it.

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<sup>1</sup>See F. Delitzsch, "Auslegung des Buches Koheleth" BK 1875:190; cf S. Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity" VT XXIV 1974:168.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>M. Jastrow Jr., A Gentle Cynic, 1919.

<sup>4</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, "Der Prediger" KAT, Band XVII/4, 1963:238.

<sup>5</sup>See also Barton (1912:18-31); Crenshaw (1983); Dell (1994); Ginsburg (1970:30-245); Gordis (1968:3-7); Holm-Nielsen (1974,1975-6); Hubbard (1991:21-33); Murphy (1982; 1992:xlvi-lvi; 1993). Gordis (1968:4) comments,

Koheleth himself would have seen in all the time and ingenuity spent on the interpretation of his tiny masterpiece one more example of the futility of human effort. For there is scarcely one aspect of the book, whether of date, authorship or interpretation, that has not been the subject of wide difference of opinion.

<sup>6</sup>Other recent books displaying a similar attitude to Qoheleth include Farmer (1991) and Fredericks (1993). Whybray (1989) is somewhat more cautious in his approach, but might still be included among those who view the book 'positively'. Murphy is quite clear that 'Qoheleth loved life' (1992:lxix), but shares Whybray's caution. For example, on the issue of the repeated 'call to enjoyment' he argues (1992:lx) that 'Qoheleth is not expressing a verdict about values in life, and expressions like these are not a positive recommendation. They are a concession to human nature.'



On the other hand, Crenshaw is one of many who adopt an opposing position<sup>7</sup>: he writes (1988:23),

Life is profitless; totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strangest book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death.

There seems little doubt that there are elements in Qohelet which readily lend themselves to a more positive reading, but equally some parts of the book seem to demand a more negative interpretation. Perhaps, then, it is as Whybray suggests (1989a:29), that

Depending on the relative weight placed by interpreters respectively on the negative and positive sides of statements [in Qohelet], a whole range of assessments of Qoheleth's outlook, from one of extreme pessimism and despair to one of courageous faith and radiant optimism has been made by ancient and modern scholar alike ... Whether he was a pessimist or an optimist, therefore, *will remain a matter of opinion*. [Our emphasis]

Murphy (1992:lv) takes this a step further when he argues,

If there is one feature that is common to *all* periods in the history of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes it is that of selective emphasis. In *Scepticisme Israélite* Johannes Pedersen concludes from his brief resume of history of exegesis (with particular attention to J.D. Michaelis and Ernest Renan) that "very different types have found their own image in Ecclesiastes, and it is remarkable that none of the interpretations mentioned is completely without some basis. There are many aspects in our book; different interpreters have highlighted what was most fitting for themselves and their age, and they understood it in their own way. But for all there was a difficulty, namely that there were also other aspects which could hardly be harmonised with their preferred view" (1931:20). This observation is true of other ages and interpreters as well. If the trend of the patristic writers and most medievals was to find in the book a doctrine to abjure the world, later emphases were equally selective, such as fear of the Lord (Eccl 12:13), and enjoyment of life (שמחה *simha*), the vanity of the world in the perspective of one who believes in a blessed immortality, or the issue of the greatest good (*summum bonum*). Or sometimes the book was interpreted in a pious vein as an expression of Solomon's "conversion". These directions appear over and over again, and they are the inevitable expression of the tensions that exist in the book itself and also within the interpreters. [His emphasis]

This accords with the claim made in the introduction to our thesis that 'in Qohelet what is centred and what is marginalised depends very largely on the interpretive strategy of the

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<sup>7</sup>Other recent works which take a similar approach include Fox (1989) and Michel (1988,1989). Ellul (1990) certainly should not be included in this category, but neither should his 'Meditation on Ecclesiastes' be termed 'positive'. He is prepared to go along with those scholars who 'call Qohelet a "skeptic", because he gleefully demolishes values and illusions' (1990:28), but has no time for Crenshaw's approach of which he writes (1990:26),

When we study this text [3:11] we will see how biased Crenshaw is. He has just one end in view: to contrast Qohelet's skepticism with all the traditional values of Yahwism. How trite!

On this basis, Crenshaw simplifies everything. He declares that Qohelet despises life, that his "hatred for life grows out of his search for profit" (pp.252-53). According to Crenshaw, this book presents a challenge to God's promises, to the glorious coming work of God promised by the prophets, since "none will remember former things *or* things to come" (p.250). All this seems extraordinarily superficial to me.

Ellul's own response (1990:236-7) to 3:11 shows that the skepticism he acknowledges is not the whole story, we need to repeat continually that Qohelet's rigorous affirmation is not that of a skeptic ... Nothing is absurd; nothing is unacceptable. However difficult we may find it to say and hear, God made each thing beautiful and good ... Thus we should approach things with an utterly critical mind, but without pessimism!



reader' (p.34)<sup>8</sup>. Thus while one reader centres the positive aspects of the book and marginalises (or in some way seeks to explain away) those aspects which are in tension with such a reading, another reader will find negativity as the central characteristic of the book, and will read the more positive elements in light of this - perhaps regarding them as traditional views to be opposed, or as tinged with irony, or deleting them as 'pious glosses'. The tensions or 'contradictions' (cf esp. Ellul, 1990:39-42<sup>9</sup>; Fox, 1989:11-12<sup>10</sup>) or 'voices' (Murphy, 1993:129) in the book have long been recognised, and have been explained in various ways (helpfully summarised by Fox, 1989:19-28), but the unique approach of this thesis has been to see these tensions - which might be more usefully viewed as the author's ambivalence regarding such things as wisdom, joy, life and death, etc. - as an important factor in the ambiguity which is a key feature of the book.

It is nothing new to note that there is ambiguity in Qohelet, most modern commentators indicate many points of ambiguity in the text, but it has not to our knowledge previously been proposed that studied ambiguity is a primary feature of the book. Farmer (1991:142,146) goes some way in this direction when she argues,

How is it possible for one small book to generate such opposite and contradictory theories about its meaning? One important reason is the ambiguity of the thematic word *hebel* ... Ecclesiastes has been understood in radically different ways by different readers in part because the thematic metaphor "all is *hebel*" is fundamentally ambiguous.

It is certainly the case that for readers of Qohelet today the word *הבל* is ambiguous: we have provided many examples of different ways in which the word has been understood, and these are not exhaustive. It is also clear that *הבל* is a, if not *the*, key word in the book. But it appears that the word, rather than being the key that unlocks 'the meaning' of Qohelet, is one of many places in the book where a space is created which the reader is required to fill in. Reed (1994:18,19) recognises something of this (although her own reading of the book is

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<sup>8</sup>Crenshaw (1988:47) acknowledges this, at least to some extent, when he writes,

Research into the book also shows that it reflects the interpreter's world view. That is why, I think, opinions vary so widely with regard to such basic matters as Qohelet's optimism or pessimism, his attitude to women (Lohfink 1979), and his advocacy of immoral conduct (Whybray 1978).

Ellul (1990:196) takes this a stage further when he asserts, 'Qohelet's book does not reveal its message when a single method of interpretation is used. It presupposes biases, and invites the reader to have them, too!'

<sup>9</sup>Ellul (1990:40) argues,

instead of applying the principle of noncontradiction to this text, we must read and understand it on the basis of the principle of contradiction, which is the key to its mode of thinking.

<sup>10</sup>Fox (1989:11) writes, 'As I see it, Qohelet's contradictions state the problems rather than resolving them, and the interpreter likewise must leave many of the observations in tension.'



actually rather unadventurous) when she describes Qohelet as 'a biblical text that is unexpectedly pertinent to the postmodern age.' She continues,

The intention is not to synthesize but to create space in which to play between the deconstruction of gender-based metanarratives of freedom and justice and the hope of social transformation ... The primary condition that qualifies a reading of the text of Ecclesiastes in the postmodern context of feminism is its thematic statement of vanity<sup>11</sup>.

While Reed seeks 'space' for a feminist reading, others use the aporia which Qohelet provides in accordance with their own more or less optimistic or pessimistic readings. Our contention is that the book readily lends itself to such varied readings, because the ambiguity of many of the key words, such as הבל, עמל, יתר(ון), טוב, רעה, ענין, חפץ, ראה, אכל, and רעות/רעיון, and other frequently used words like כי and אשר/ש- and even the conjunctive or disjunctive prefix ו-, of a considerable amount of the syntax, of many key passages, and indeed of the book as a whole, demands that the reader plays a significant part by filling in the gaps to create meaning<sup>12</sup>.

Page, in a book entitled *Ambiguity and the Presence of God* (1985:23), mentions Qohelet only once when she writes,

'Vanity of vanities,' says Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, 'all is vanity.' He has seen change, inequality and injustice in this life and has no hope after death, so he recommends that people should enjoy their work and recreation under God as they can. Anything more is emptiness and the chasing of wind. A similarly disillusioned conclusion could emerge from the recognition of Ambiguity (sic) in every aspect of human and natural possibility.

However, it is precisely the ambiguous nature of life 'under the sun' that is captured by the ambiguity in Qohelet. It has often been suggested that whatever else the author of Qohelet is

<sup>11</sup>However, we are unconvinced by her assertion (1994:29) that 'The text of Ecclesiastes is a *locus classicus* of anti-foundational thinking.' She contends (1994:21) that

In many ways the text is the most densely woven anti-foundationalism and eclecticism that we can encounter. His views contrast radically with previous wisdom teaching, for example the book of Proverbs in which ethical and speculative knowledge accord prosperity and honour to the righteous.

In fact, while Qohelet does ask some very probing questions, similar questions are posed elsewhere, if not with the same force. Moreover, the margins of Reed's reading must contain those parts of the book where traditional wisdom is asserted, e.g., 3:17; 8:12,13; 11:9b; 12:13,14. Nonetheless, the idea that Qohelet is a text which is particularly appropriate to postmodernity (assuming such a thing exists!), bears some consideration - particularly if, with Smart (1993:27), 'postmodernity' is taken to

denote a way of relating to the limits and limitations of modernity, a way of living with the realisation that the promise of modernity to deliver order, certainty and security will remain unfulfilled. Facing up to this condition, recognising 'that certainty is not to be, and yet [persevering] in the pursuit of knowledge born of the determination to smother and weed out contingency' (Bauman Z, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), p.244) is how we might understand the notion of postmodernity.

<sup>12</sup>There are hints of this in Murphy's article entitled 'On Translating Ecclesiastes' where he says (1991:571-2), My modest purpose is to designate and discuss some key passages, especially in chap. 7, where the translation is simply dubious or the interpretation ambiguous ... If an ambiguity occurs, it is to be resolved by an evaluative choice among several possibilities ... But another important factor is the previous construal of the translator, whether this be a construal of the book as a whole or in part.

(s)he is certainly a realist<sup>13</sup>, and a key element in her or his realism which has not sufficiently been taken into account, is the portrayal by means of ambiguous text of a world which is itself subject to hugely varied interpretation. Just as people come to the world with different presuppositions and 'read' it differently, so readers come to the world of Qohelet and respond to it in different ways. Crenshaw (1988:49) takes a first step towards acknowledging this aspect of the book when he says,

Qohelet bares his soul in all its twistings and turnings, ups and downs, and he invites readers to accompany him in pursuit of fresh discovery. But the contradictions suggest more than the result of time's passage. They express the ambiguities of daily existence.

Ellul (1990:117) goes somewhat farther, arguing that when we read Qohelet, we 'enter an extremely ambiguous universe, in which we can never be sure we have fathomed the author's intention.' The same might be said of life under the sun: it, too, is extremely ambiguous, and one can never be sure (s)he has fathomed *its* Author's intention - however hard one seeks, however wise (s)he may be, however much (s)he may claim to know. Take, for example, the cycles of nature described in 1:4-7: are they dependable phenomena which provide an element of security and predictability to life, or are they part of a monotonous cycle of endless repetitions from which there is no escape? According to 3:1-8, everything under the sun has its time (but is it, in 3:11, 'beautiful' in its time, or simply 'appropriate?'): are people then but pawns in a cosmic chessgame over which they have no real control (as 7:13,14 seem to assert) and whose rules they can never fully comprehend (as 8:17 may imply), or are they free to explore the limits and limitations of life (as Qohelet does throughout, cf e.g., 1:13,17; 2:1,3,10,12; 7:25; 8:9; 9:1), and express and enjoy themselves within these necessary restrictions (as perhaps is advised in the 'calls to enjoyment' in 2:24; 3:12-13,22; 5:17-18; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9-10)? Is work (or is it 'toil?') a necessary evil to provide the means for survival and what little pleasure one can glean in the few days of life available to him/her (as, e.g., in 2:18-23), or is it ('work' or 'wealth?') given to enrich life and provide creative activity (as may be indicated in 2:24; 5:17 and 9:9)? Is wisdom a benefit which enables its possessor to more fully appreciate the complexities of the world and to live a more fulfilling life as a result (as suggested by verses such as 2:13-14a,24; 7:11-12,19; 8:1; 9:17-18; 10:2-12), or is it an extra

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Whybray (1989:28) concludes the passage quoted above, 'Whether he was a pessimist or an optimist, therefore, will remain a matter of opinion; what is certain is that he was a realist.'



burden that gives greater insight into the injustices and anomalies of life, but which does not provide any ultimate return (which seems to be argued in 1:18; 2:14b-16,21; 7:13-18; 8:16-17; 9:10-11,13-16; 10:1)? Is death a blessed release from life under the sun (4:2), or is it the final irony which casts its shadow over all the pleasures of life (as 9:10 suggests and perhaps is implied in 11:8; 12:7-8), or is it the supreme injustice because it takes no account of good or evil (as the author complains in 2:14b-16; 9:2-3) or is it simply one of the necessary limits within which people have to operate (as may be intended in 3:2; 11:8 and perhaps 12:7)? In an ambiguous world people are confronted by endless data which they read differently (not only from other people, but also at different times in their own lives) according to the interpretive strategy they bring to bear upon it. Qohelet observes this world very carefully, and records what (s)he sees in language that captures its ambiguous nature.

Not only is the ambiguous nature of Qohelet's text a reflection of life under the sun, so too are the patterns which can be discerned in the book. There are undoubtedly patterns and structures in Qohelet which tempt the reader to seek the one overall pattern which explains the way the book is put together. So also life under the sun: here too there are patterns and structures that tease people into trying to find *the* solution that explains it all, to search for 'grand narratives'. One of the features of postmodernism is the realisation that no such solution is to be found<sup>14</sup>; one of the features of our thesis is the claim that no such solution to the structure of Qohelet is to be found. We can certainly discover trends in the book, for example from first to second person address, or from observations about what happens under the sun to statements about the limitations of human knowledge, but none of these provides a sufficient explanation of the book's structure. Similarly, trends can be discerned in the world, for example that those who act wisely or righteously *tend* to benefit in some way as a result (thus, e.g., 8:12b-13; and most of ch.10), or that power is frequently on the side of an oppressor while the oppressed have no-one to comfort them (e.g., 4:1;5:7), but none of these trends provides a sufficient governing principle for life. We can also discover structures within Qohelet, like the careful balance of the sections in chs.1,2, but any attempt to structure the whole book in

<sup>14</sup>As Smart (1993:101) notes, 'It has been suggested that the postmodern political condition is premised upon the demise of "grand narratives".' More precisely (1993:26),

Our explanations, assumptions and values, along with the grand narratives of liberalism and socialism which derive from that complex eighteenth-century configuration known as 'The Enlightenment', are found wanting when we try to make sense of contemporary conditions.

similar fashion is ultimately frustrated. Attempts are still made, and will no doubt continue to be made, to find *the* structure of Qohelet, but any overall structure to the book involves some degree of manipulation of the text to make it fit a particular pattern. Similarly, life under the sun eludes our efforts to discern an overall pattern in which everything has its appropriate place. No matter how simple or sophisticated our philosophy, there will always be those aspects of life that defy explanation and refuse to fit our scheme. Of course, such aspects of life (and Qohelet) may be pushed to the margin, but it is only as we allow the voices from the margin<sup>15</sup> to speak and to challenge our own presuppositions that we truly begin to understand the world (and Qohelet) in all its plurality and ambiguity<sup>16</sup>.

Of course, it may be argued that there is one certainty both for Qohelet and in the world, that death is the end of life under the sun. However, even this is ambiguous. The text within the inclusio starts with (an ambiguous) reference to the coming and going of generations (1:4,11), and ends with a description of approaching death (12:1-7). But, the final words of this description *could* hint at the possibility of something beyond death, a hint which *might* also be found in 3:21, but stands in some tension with 9:10. Moreover, at least in the canonical form of the book (and, we would maintain, also by the author's design) there is an epilogue that takes the reader beyond the inclusio surrounding Qohelet's description of life -

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<sup>15</sup>*Voices from the Margin* is the title of a collection of essays on biblical topics by Latin American, Asian and black biblical scholars. Sugirtharajah, the editor, explains in his introduction (1991:1,2) that the title indicates two things. First, it highlights the struggles and exegetical concerns of those who are on the periphery of society. Generally, the dominant biblical scholarship has shied away from the needs of the weak and the needy. Very rarely has it focused on people's experience of hunger, sickness and exploitation. These essays embody the needs and aspirations of those who are not normally at the forefront of things.

Secondly, it points to the marginalization of Asian, Latin American, black and other biblical scholars by mainline biblical scholarship. This is an experience that is very familiar to Euro-American feminist Scripture scholars. Most of the essayists are invisible in Euro-American academic circles, and one seldom finds their discourses in the journals produced in them.

<sup>16</sup>*Plurality and Ambiguity* is the title of a book by David Tracy. Tracy, in a chapter entitled 'Radical Ambiguity: The Question of History', argues (1987:78,79),

Postmodernity demands multiple discourses for interpretation itself. As postmodern writers and thinkers remind us, we live within intertextuality ... Every discourse, by operating under certain assumptions, necessarily excludes other assumptions. Above all, our discourses exclude those others who might disrupt the established hierarchies or challenge the prevailing hegemony of power.

And yet the voices of the other multiply ... All the victims of our discourses and our history have begun to discover their own discourses in ways that our discourse finds difficult to hear, much less listen to. Their voices can seem strident and uncivil - in a word, other. And they are. We have all just begun to sense the terror of that otherness. *But only by beginning to listen to those other voices may we also begin to hear the otherness within our own discourse and within ourselves. What we might then begin to hear, above our own chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream.* [Our emphasis]

In relation to biblical studies he contends (1987:15) that 'In our own period, the power of the biblical texts is often best found in the readings from the basic communities of the poor and marginalized.'



and death - under the sun. Qohelet, whose words are recorded in 1:2-12:8<sup>17</sup>, is now described in the third person, and perhaps also in the past tense: Qohelet *was* a wise person, who *taught* the people knowledge and *sought* to find pleasing words - this could give a rather different sense to the expression סוף דבר הכל נשמע. In the epilogue the reader is taken beyond the world described by the person (or, more probably, persona<sup>18</sup>) Qohelet so that (s)he is privy to the perspective of the omniscient author, who then addresses the reader directly in the imperatives of the second half of the epilogue. The confident assertion with which the epilogue, and the book, closes, that God will bring (possibly future as also in 3:17 and 11:9) all deeds into judgment, raises again the question whether life 'under the sun' is all there is. Qohelet examined thoroughly every aspect of this world, but perhaps - and here lies the final great ambiguity of the book - the author finally takes the reader beyond Qohelet's world, beyond the realm under the sun where everything is characterised by הבל. The epilogue to Qohelet might then serve a similar purpose to the prologue to Job: the prologue to the book of Job takes the reader outside the world Job knows and gives him/her privileged information to which Job, his three friends and Elihu do not have access. However, two crucial differences should be noted: firstly, God features as a speaking character in Job but is notably silent in Qohelet; secondly, Job commences with explicit acknowledgement of another realm but Qohelet gives only the faintest ambiguous hints that there may be something beyond life under the sun.

Qohelet, even without the epilogue, is not simply a disinterested representation of an ambiguous world - even were such a thing possible. A crucial element in the interpretive strategy that Qohelet brings to bear on the 'text' of the ambiguous world (s)he explores is that

<sup>17</sup>We agree here with Fox (1989:311) who states,

the words of Qohelet (1:3-12:7), the motto (1:2;12:8), and the epilogue (12:9-14) are all the creation of the same person, the author of the book, who is not to be identified with Qohelet, his persona. In other words, the speaker we hear referring to Qohelet in the third person in 1:1-2; 7:27 ('amar haqqohelet); and 12:8, who comes to the fore in the epilogue (12:9-14), and whose "I" we hear just once in the suffix of b<sup>e</sup>ni in 12:12 - this speaker is the "teller of the tale", the frame narrator of the "tale" of Qohelet. This narrator looks back and, using the common stance of wisdom teacher, tells his son about the sage Qohelet, transmitting to him Qohelet's teaching, then appreciatively but cautiously evaluating the work of Qohelet and other sages. *The body of the book is formally a long quotation of Qohelet's words.* [Our emphasis]

<sup>18</sup>As Fox (1989:315) explains,

Since there is an implied author mediating Qohelet's words, we cannot simply identify Qohelet with the author. Qohelet is a persona, a character created in the work who may be a close expression of the author's attitudes, but whose words cannot be assumed to be inseparable from the ideas of his creator.

Fox goes on to assert that 'Qohelet may be recognized as a persona even if one regards him as based on an historical character.'



there is a God. Moreover, there are three main characteristics of this God to which (s)he draws attention - none of which (s)he can have discerned by simple observation of the world<sup>19</sup>. Firstly, God gives<sup>20</sup>. 13 times (or 14 times if the expression *מרעה אחר* in 12:11 refers to God) the root *נתן* is used with God as subject (1:13; 2:26,26; 3:10,11,13; 5:17,18,18; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9; 12:7); on three further occasions God's 'giving' is described without using the verb *נתן* (*מִיד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא* in 2:24; *הָאֱלֹהִים מַעֲנֶה בְּשִׂמְחָה* in 5:19; *כִּבְר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂיךָ* in 9:7); and once God's *not* giving is referred to, again without using *נתן* (*וְלֹא-יִשְׁטַנּוּ הָאֱלֹהִים*) in 6:2).

Secondly, God acts<sup>21</sup>. The root *עשה* is used 11 times in connection with God (3:11,11,11,14,14; 7:13,14,29; 8:17; 11:5,5)<sup>22</sup>; but we are also informed that God 'seeks' (3:15); 'tests' (3:18, if indeed this is what the verb means); and 'judges' (3:17; 11:9; 12:14). Perhaps the reference to 'your creator' in 12:1 could be included in this category.

Thirdly, God is to be worshipped<sup>23</sup>. God acts, according to 3:14, in order that people might fear him. 'Fearing God' is mentioned 6 times in total (3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12,13; 12:13); and those who are 'good' in God's sight (2:26; 7:26) may be equivalent to those who 'fear' him (7:18; 8:12). In addition, the passage 4:17-5:6, which instructs the reader concerning appropriate ways to worship, explicitly mentions God 6 times<sup>24</sup>.

However, none of these divine characteristics is unambiguous. Certainly God's giving is associated with the 'call to enjoyment' (cf 2:24,26; 3:13; 5:17,18,18; 8:15; 9:9), which

<sup>19</sup>This statement betrays a twentieth century AD perspective on Qohelet's interpretive strategy. It may be that the existence of God was considered by Qohelet to be an obvious, perhaps unavoidable, conclusion to draw from his/her observation of a world in which there are many things that could not be explained other than as 'given by God'. It may also be the case that Qohelet believed (s)he could discern God's activity in the world - even if (s)he did not understand it. Clearly, such a God should be 'feared' - however precisely one understands that term in this context. Such arguments are, of course, also propounded today.

<sup>20</sup>What God gives and does not give is the primary focus of 5:17-6:2, where one of three clusters of occurrences of the word *אלהים* appears. However, this is an important feature of discussion relating to God through the book.

<sup>21</sup>This is the main theme of the latter part of ch.3 where there is a greater concentration of occurrences of the word *אלהים* than anywhere else in the book. What God 'does' is important elsewhere, and the important themes of God's 'giving' and 'judging', and 'fearing' God also occur in ch.3. This is a critical passage for determining Qohelet's attitude towards God - it is also one of the most ambiguous parts of the whole book!

<sup>22</sup>We noted above that discussion of God's deeds and of human deeds alternates, using the same terms from the root *עשה*. The ambiguity on several occasions concerning the subject of the verb *עשה*, divine or human, is an important feature of this discussion.

<sup>23</sup>'Worship of God' is the main theme of 4:17-5:6, where there is another cluster of occurrences of the word *אלהים*.

<sup>24</sup>These three categories include 39 out of the 40 explicit references to God in Qohelet. *שְׁבוּעָה אֱלֹהִים* in 8:2 is rather obscure, but it may be a hint that 'the king' in 8:1-7 is an allusion to God. In this case, as we noted earlier, *יַחֲפֹץ יַעֲשֶׂה* in v.3 and *וּמִי יֹאמַר-לּוֹ מִה-תַּעֲשֶׂה* in v.4 may be further references to God's deeds. *נַעֲשֶׂה* in v.11 *מִהֲרָה* in v.14 *מַעֲשֶׂה הָרָעָה* in v.14 *כַּמַּעֲשֶׂה* in v.14.



seems to be positive (unless, of course, it is ironic). But the giving of ענין רע in 1:13 and ענין in 3:10 is somewhat more negative; 'the sinner' comes off rather badly from God's giving in 2:26; and there is considerable irony in the giving of wealth without the ability to enjoy it in 6:2. Moreover, the statements that את-העלם נתן בלבם in 3:11, and האלהים מענה בשמחה לבו in 5:19 are highly ambiguous, and it is far from clear whether they are positive or negative.

God makes things beautiful (or appropriate?) in their time (3:11); what God does endures forever (3:14); God seeks out what is past (? 3:15); God makes people upright (7:29); and he judges the righteous and the wicked and all deeds, whether good or bad (3:17; 11:9; 12:14). But an important characteristic of God's deeds to which Qohelet draws attention is that people cannot make them out (3:11; 8:17; 11:5). Moreover, it seems that he acts in order that people will fear him (3:14); and human beings are unable to change what God has done (7:13), even though he causes both the good and bad times (7:14). The statement in 3:18 that לברם האלהים ולראות שהם-בהמה המה להם is ambiguous and rather obscure.

We considered above the question whether 'fear' indicates reverence, or something more akin to terror. The precise implications of the expression טוב לפני האלהים are also unclear. So also is the motivation for the instruction about worship in 4:17-5:6 - should one take care to adopt the appropriate attitude out of reverence, or is the advice motivated by the fear of an unknown and distant God?

The author of Qohelet is an enigma. Who is (s)he: king, counsellor, wise person - or none of these? Is (s)he the person Qohelet (or is it *the* Qohelet?), and if not does (s)he endorse what Qohelet says? What is his/her philosophy of life? The answers to these and other questions concerning the author of this book are far from clear. Perhaps this is a reflection of the Author of life. Just as the relationship between the reader of Qohelet and its author is abstruse, so also the relationship between humanity and God. Is it ever possible to be quite sure what the author/Author intends at any point? Is (s)he toying with the reader by giving hints of answers to the questions life poses; by providing clues to structures and patterns which never quite seem to work out; by speaking with different, perhaps even contradictory, voices? Does (s)he approve of what Qohelet says, or of the words of the wise, or even of the instruction to fear God? One might well ask if such questions are not the response of a reader who is to a greater or lesser extent a child of the modern and postmodern age, and could not be the intention of

the author of Qohelet. This is probably true. The question remains open how much ambiguity was intended by the person or people who wrote the book we know as Qohelet. What this reader has attempted to do is to probe the text of Qohelet for ambiguities so as to explore the ways in which it might, with the imposition of very different interpretive strategies, yield 'meaning'.

Our conclusion is that the text of Qohelet is highly ambiguous, and the intentions of its author (or creator) are often far from clear. The observation that this ambiguity occurs throughout the book, that it affects words and phrases which are crucial to the reader's understanding of the work, that it operates at the formal as well as the textual level, and that consensus on every aspect of the book - author, setting, structure, meaning ... even its right to be included in the Hebrew Bible - has eluded commentators throughout its history, while it has nonetheless continued to fascinate its readers who have consistently found it to realistically address the world they know, lead us to conclude that it is a carefully crafted work in which ambiguity is an integral part *by design*. It is thus a very accurate reflection of life under the sun: it too is highly ambiguous, and the intentions of its Author (or Creator) are also often unclear. Different people with different presuppositions will continue to read the world differently, and will come to different conclusions about the intentions of its Author. Indeed, the commentators and readers of this 'text' have throughout known history disagreed, and will no doubt continue to disagree, about its Author (if such is even accepted), its setting, its structure and its meaning. Such is life. Such also is the book of Qohelet.



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